

HOW LONG DOES IT
Actually Take
TO WRITE A BOOK?

DR JENNIFER JONES



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About me

Published author and expert writing coach, Jennifer Jones has been helping people become happier, more productive writers since 2001. She trained to teach writing during her PhD at the University of California at Davis. When she's not talking about writing, she can often be found researching and writing about banned books or Victorian medicine and popular culture.

Connect with me

LINKEDIN

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jjonesewc/>

INSTAGRAM

<https://www.instagram.com/jenniferewc/>



OVERVIEW: HOW LONG DOES IT ACTUALLY TAKE?

*Active time:
65-ish
hours*

1

First Steps - 3-ish hours

Spend some time getting to know your reader, choosing a topic, and outlining your book.

2

Messy Draft - 40 hours

Whether you write it in one week or 6 months, you'll spend about 40 hours on this step.

3

Two rounds of revision - 12 hours

You can do this in one monstrously long day, over a weekend, or over a week or more - your choice!

4

Beta readers - Them: 4 weeks | You: 5 hours

Your beta readers will need 4 weeks with your draft. You won't have any work to do on the book during this time! When you get it back, make the changes you agree with.

5

Editor - Them: 4+ weeks | You: 8 hours

Your editor will likely need at least a month with your manuscript - book them well in advance (like the week you decide when you're going to write your book), unless you like paying a premium for rushed work. When you get it back, go through the edits carefully and make the changes you agree with.

6

Formatting and Publishing - Variable

If you outsource this, it won't take you any time at all. If you do it yourself, how long it takes depends on how you cope with the tech involved.



THE MYTH OF THE *Natural Writer*



When you hear that someone is writing a book, do you imagine that they're spending hours and hours every day in front of their computer typing away? Do you also imagine that budding author is confident in every word they put on the page?

Do you worry you'll never be able to commit that much time or find that much confidence? Don't!

There's no need to worry - real writers don't work that way.



The myth

Western culture seems to like the idea that all authors spend hours and hours alone with their thoughts and their words - somehow instinctively knowing how to write their books.

I discuss this in chapter 7 in my first book - *There's a Book in Every Expert (that's you!)*. The idea that writing should come "naturally" or not at all has silenced countless authors.

This myth divides the world into authors and not-authors because it presumes some people are just born knowing how to write.

This simply isn't true - writers do not spring fully formed into being like Athena did from Zeus's head!

So we're going to work on letting go of that myth.

“Writers do not spring fully formed into being like Athena did from Zeus's head!”



What are we getting out of the myth?

Before we can let go of the myth, we need to understand why we're so intent on hanging on to it. What are we getting out of it?

By hanging on to the idea that authors have more time, focus, commitment, creativity, and confidence than the rest of us (not-authors), we let ourselves off the hook. The myth that authors just know how to write and do it quickly, easily, and "naturally" assures the rest of us that we don't have to try because we weren't born knowing all the things authors apparently know.

In short, we maintain this myth because we're afraid of failure - if we don't try, we can't fail.

Exercise

What you'll need:

- blank sheet of paper
- writing utensil
- timer

1. Set the timer for 5 minutes and list all the things you would write if you were a 'naturally' good writer.
2. Reset the timer and write for 5 minutes about why you haven't tried to write those things yet.



Authors are made, not born

When we find the courage to let go of the myth, it's clear that authors are made, not born.

Did you notice that I used scare quotes around the word naturally above? I did that because there's no such thing as a natural writer. Experienced writers write "naturally" because they have years of training and practice, not because they were born with a special power that not-authors are missing.

On some level, you know this is true. If you don't remember learning to form letters (the first time you learned to write), you've probably seen a child in your life go through the process. Have you ever come across a 4- or 5-year-old who could form all the letters without being shown how?

Now think about all the steps that go into 'learning to form letters' - first the child has to learn the alphabet - this usually involves years (or at least several months) of singing the ABCs (often loudly and incorrectly) before they connect those sounds to letters in a book or on their toys (alphabet blocks, etc.). Children also need months or years to learn to hold a writing implement and then to learn to guide it to form recognisable shapes.



Authors are made, not born - continued

I could go on, but you get the idea - you'd never get frustrated with a 5-year-old for not being a "natural" writer, so why do you get frustrated with your grown-up self for not just knowing how to write your book?

Just as you can learn any other craft, you can learn the craft of writing, and it doesn't take nearly as long as people imagine. If you want to write your expert book (you know, the one about how you help your clients), you're ready to do it! Stick around, in the rest of this PDF, I show you exactly how long it takes!

Exercise

Take a few minutes to think about what you wrote when you completed the exercise on page 5 - are you getting in your own way by holding onto the myth of the natural writer?

If you are, please book a chat with me - you deserve to have your voice heard; if I can help you stop silencing yourself, I will.

<https://tidycal.com/jennifer5/lets-talk-about-writing>

**Note: This is not a sales call - it's just a quick chat about your writing blocks.*



PRE-WORK - 3+ HOURS

Before you start your book, you need to do some pre-work on your mindset, commitment to the project, and understanding of what's really involved.

Pre-work step 1: Your mindset

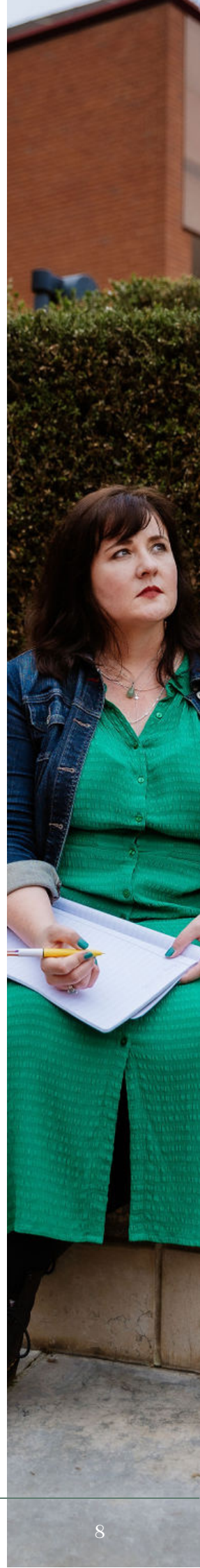
I often say writing doesn't have to be as hard as most of us were taught to make it, but that doesn't mean it's always easy. Before you start your book, you need to do some mindset work to increase your chances of finishing.

I'd strongly suggest that you write this work down - or record it as a video or audio. Why? Because you need to be able to come back to it.

To do this work, you need to spend some time with these questions:

1. What evidence do you have that you know enough to write your book?
2. What evidence do you have that your potential readers value your knowledge?
3. What evidence do you have that you can use your expertise to help others?

Having answers to these questions will help you quiet your internal critic when you have a rough writing day!



Pre-work step 2: Your commitment

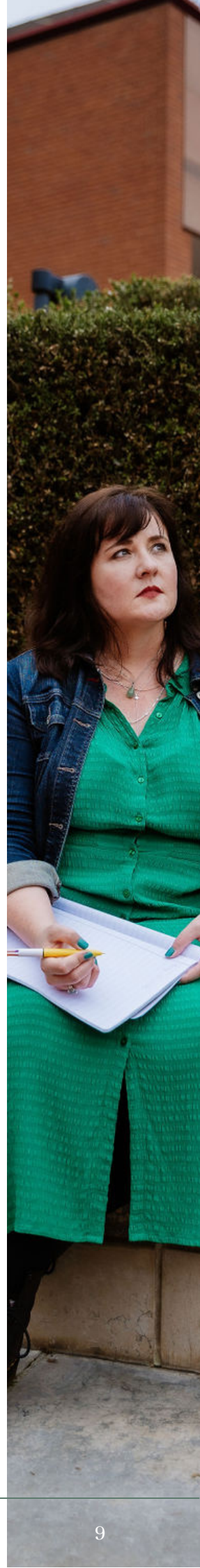
Writing a book takes time. It doesn't take as long as most people imagine, but it's also not going to write itself.

All told, your active time for writing your book is about 65 hours. You'll need to be confident that you can either clear the decks when you need to focus on your book or that you'll be able to work on it little and often.

These are the main steps involved in writing your book:

1. Planning - getting to know your reader, focusing your topic, outlining. 3+ hours
2. Messy draft - aka, your first draft. 40 hours
3. Revision - 2 rounds: big picture and polish. approx. 12 hours
4. Beta readers - they'll need a month, you'll need about 5 hours
5. Editor - they'll need a month, you'll need about 8 hours

Before you start your book, you'll need to know where you're going to find the time to write it. You'll also need to know how you're going to deal with the inevitable setbacks. You don't want to talk about the book you're writing for months and then never produce the book!

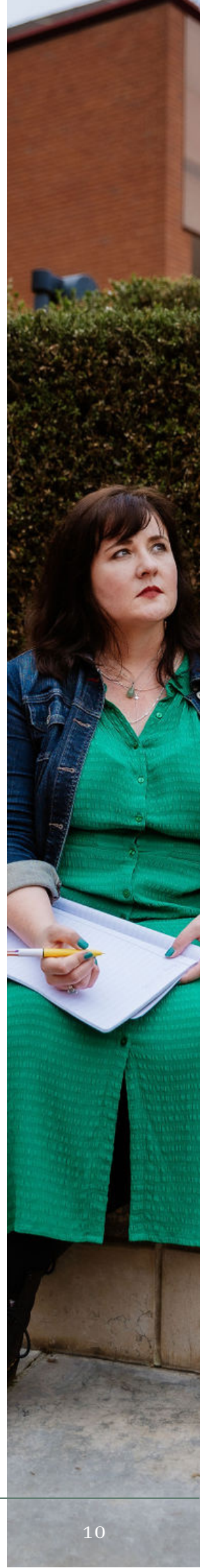


Pre-work step 3: What's involved beyond writing and editing

I wish writing your book was all there was to it, but it's not. Your book is not Kevin Costner's Field of Dreams! If you're not familiar with the film, Costner's character is told to build a baseball diamond in the middle of nowhere for some late-great players to play on: "If you build it they will come".

Since you'll need to do more than build/write your book, in addition to the steps outlined above, you'll need the following:

- a marketing plan
- an audience who are interested in buying, reading, and reviewing your book
- at least one means of communicating with that audience - social media, newsletter, etc.
- an incentive to get that audience to actually read and review it
- a way to produce and share marketing materials (digital ones like social media posts and, possibly, physical ones like branded bookmarks)
- a book formatter - or the willingness to learn how to do this yourself
- a cover designer - or the ability to do it yourself



Pre-work step 3 - continued

- depending on where you live - you may need to purchase ISBN numbers
- a plan for where you're going to publish - I recommend using both Amazon and IngramSpark (they distribute the book to booksellers that aren't Amazon).

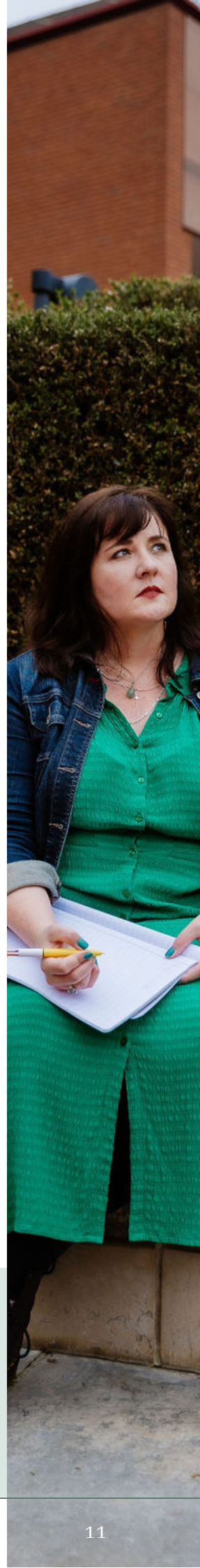
Need some help?

If you're thinking that looks like a lot - it would be, if you tried to do everything at once. But if you take it step by step and do one thing at a time - in the right order - it's completely doable.

I discuss all of this in detail in my mini-course and workbook, *Think Like an Author: Get ready to write your book*. If you're ready to write your book, get your copy today!



For most writers, pre-work will take about 3 hours.



FIRST STEPS - 3+ HOURS

Since you're writing your expert book (a book about how you help your clients), you don't need to do any research before you start. Surprised? You shouldn't be - the years you've spent training and actually helping people have taught you all you need to know! If you're not convinced, read this post: "[Do you know enough to write a book?](#)"

That said, there are 3 things you need to do before you start:

Step - 1

GET TO KNOW YOUR READER

This makes writing and marketing your book easier!

Step - 2

DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT YOUR READER TO GET FROM YOUR BOOK

Your book needs one - and only one - main point!

Step - 3

FOCUS YOUR TOPIC AND OUTLINE YOUR BOOK

This is the foundation for the rest of your book!



Getting to know your reader

Since you're writing a book about how you help people in your business, you should know your reader fairly well. But your ideal client and your ideal reader may not be the same person - it's possible that your ideal reader is earlier in the process than your ideal client.

To figure out who your ideal reader is, you'll need to figure out how you want your book to function in your business - in other words, at what stage in the process of getting to know you do you want your potential future clients to read it?

Once you've figured out in broad terms who your reader is, you'll need to spend some time getting to know them. For help doing that, click the button below to have a look at a post I wrote a while back called "How to write like you talk to your friends".

READ NOW



For most writers, this step will take about an hour. However, if you decide to do market research (surveys, interviews, etc.), it will take longer.



What do you want your reader to get from your book?

This looks like an easy question, but don't be fooled. You need to pick 1 (and only 1) problem that your book will solve for your reader.

For your book to be a success, it needs to solve a problem your reader is aware of and wants a solution for.

As you consider what you want your book to do for your reader, do yourself a favour and remember that your book is not the place to put all of your training and years of experience. Instead, it's the place for you to teach one process or lesson.

If you're now worried that won't be enough to fill a whole book, stop. By the time you explain why you're teaching "the thing" (i.e. the process/topic you choose), what your experience with "the thing" is, and all the steps for doing "the thing", you'll have plenty of material for a book.



For inexperienced writers working with a coach (or for experienced writers working alone), this step will take 1 to 1.5 hrs. For inexperienced writers working alone, it is likely to take a bit longer.



Foams and outline

In this step, you narrow your topic down as much as possible and state it as a statement of argument (US writers tend to call this a thesis statement). I discuss this in step 4 in this blog post: "How do you decide what to write?"

READ NOW

Take your time over writing your statement of argument - it's the single most important sentence in your book!

Once you're happy with your statement of argument, it's time to write your outline. The most useful and writer-friendly form of outlining I've ever seen is the one I teach:

1. list all the questions your reader might have about your statement of argument
2. put those questions in a logical order and delete any questions that are repetitive/irrelevant

In addition to discussing this method in the blog post linked above, I cover it in chapter 6 of *There's a Book in Every Expert (that's you!)*:

BUY NOW



For inexperienced writers working with a coach (or for experienced writers working alone), this step will take 1 to 1.5hrs. For inexperienced writers working alone, it is likely to take a bit longer.



MESSY DRAFT – 40 HOURS

Writing your messy draft, aka first draft, is by far the most time consuming part of the process. The main challenges you'll face at this stage are in your mind. This post will help you develop the mindset you need to write a successfully messy first draft.

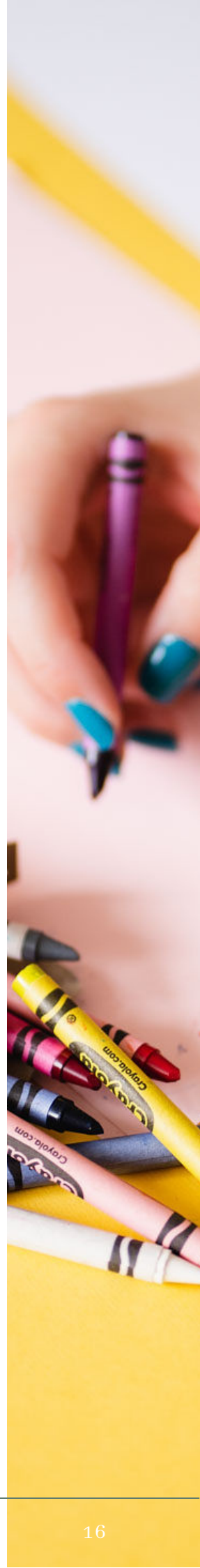
We'll start by putting the time commitment in perspective. I know 40 hours is a lot of time to commit to one thing, but there's no reason for it to feel overwhelming. Then we'll work on letting go of your inner perfectionist and embracing the idea of the messy draft.

Finding time for your messy draft

We don't all work the same way. Some of you want a steady approach to writing your first draft that fits comfortably into your usual routine. Others want it done yesterday, and those writers are willing to upend their routine for a short time to make it happen. Here's what the two approaches look like in practice:

STEADY PROGRESS

Instead of asking yourself where you're going to find 40 hours, try asking if you can find about an hour most days over 8 weeks. Or, can you find about 30 minutes twice a day, most days over 8 weeks? Or can you find 15 minutes 3 to 4 times a day, most days over 8 weeks?



Finding time - continued

Those asks don't sound so hard, do they?

Most of us can find little bits of time for things that matter, especially if we know that we only have to do it for the short term.

Though this is my preferred way of writing, that doesn't make it the 'right' way. Some of you may prefer the other option.

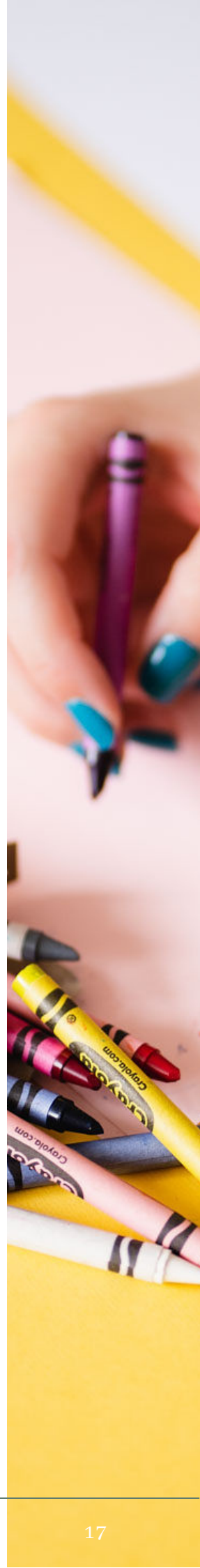
QUICK RESULTS

If you prefer to immerse yourself in a new project and get it done quickly, the steady approach I outlined above probably makes you uncomfortable. No worries - I know one-size-fits all approaches don't work.

You can break up the 40 hours you'll need to write your messy draft any way that works for you: 4 hours per day for 10 days, 8 hours per day for 5 days, ...

Managing longer sessions is as much skill as personality trait.

Before you embark on trying to work this way, you'll need to have your internal editor (your inner perfectionist) well under control because getting a draft done in 40 hours requires you to write quickly and messily the whole time.



Finding time - continued

You also need to know that you're capable of staying focused on this kind of work for long stretches of time without getting bored.

Make a mess of your first draft

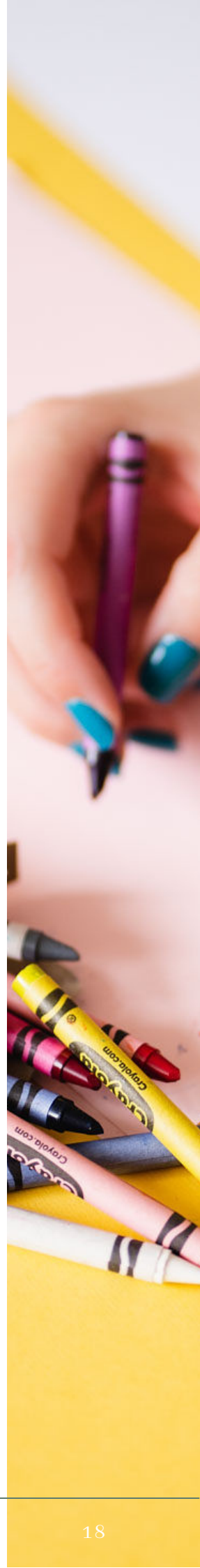
Your first draft's only job is to be done! Perfect drafting, aka, taking the time to write a 'good' or 'clean' first draft is a waste of time.

I often compare the writing process to clearing out your wardrobe. Your first draft is like the first stage of a clear out when you chuck all of your clothes onto your bed.

At that stage, you're just getting all of your clothes out so you can see what you have. It comes before the stage when you sort through the clothes and decide what you want to keep and what you want to get rid of.

You wouldn't pause at this stage to tailor a jacket you haven't worn in years to fit your body today, would you? Almost certainly not! Imagine how long a clear out would take if you took the time to tailor garments you weren't even sure you wanted to keep!

The same applies to writing - there's no point in editing sentences you're not sure you're going to keep.



Make a mess - continued

If your internal editor (inner perfectionist) is under control, you can simply remind her that this is a messy draft and she needs to keep quiet while you write it. Do you need some help keeping her quiet? Read on.

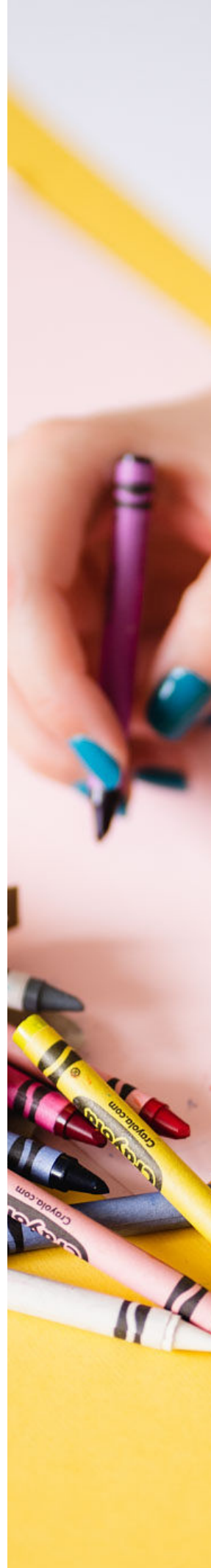
One way to convince your internal editor that it's safe for you to write a messy draft is to write it in a medium that she knows won't be published - like in crayon on unlined paper.

No, I'm not suggesting you write your whole draft in crayon (unless you really want to, of course). Just use that technique long enough to get your initial ideas out and show your internal editor that it's safe to make a mess. I explain this in more detail in a guest post I wrote for Little Miss Purple called 'Embrace the Mess' and in chapter 9 of my first book, *There's a Book in Every Expert (that's you!)*.



Whether you spread the writing time over a week or several months, you need 40 hours for this stage.

Keeping it to 40 hours requires that you fully commit to writing a messy draft. It's easier to do that with a coach. If you slip into perfect drafting, you'll end up wasting a lot of time that would be better spent on something else.



CLEAN UP - 12 HOURS

As with most clean up tasks, cleaning up your messy draft is best approached in stages:

- 1) Big picture revision
- 2) Polish - detailed revision

As you clean up or revise your text, remember this isn't the final draft - you will send your book to a professional editor, so don't worry if you're not 100% sure about things like where you need commas, semicolons, and colons!

Big picture revision

In your first revision, you're looking at the big-picture issues - which means you are not worrying about details like spelling and punctuation. If you do this work on your digital draft, make a new copy of it and save it as something like 'draft - revision 1'.

To do this level of revision, print a copy of your outline questions with their answers (the statements of argument for each chapter) - put your main statement of argument at the top of this page. Read through the statements of argument. Are they in a logical order? Are they all still focused on the original topic, or has your book changed focus?



Big picture revision - continued

Change happens.

It's okay if your book changes focus, but you need to make sure that its structure is logical so it will be useful for your reader. If you rearrange or remove chapters (move them to a new document; don't delete anything) at this point, print a new list of statements of argument and questions. This can't be over emphasised:

don't delete anything!

GO CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

Once you're happy with your list of questions, start reading the book while considering these points for each chapter:

- Is the chapter focused on its statement of argument? If it wanders off topic, highlight or otherwise mark the passages that are off topic.
- Is each paragraph focused on one - and only one - main topic? Generally speaking, if you have at least 5 paragraphs per side of A4, yours are probably focused. If you have longer paragraphs - check their focus and consider breaking them into smaller ones.
- Have you discussed each topic/issue in the right amount of detail for your reader?

Big picture revision - continued

TIME TO MOVE

When you finish, move any paragraphs/sections that need to be moved (remember some of these may be moved to a 'to be used later' document). If you haven't already, make a copy of your digital draft and save it as something like 'draft - revision 1'. Doing this will save you from any risk of deleting something you meant to keep or otherwise losing your earlier work.

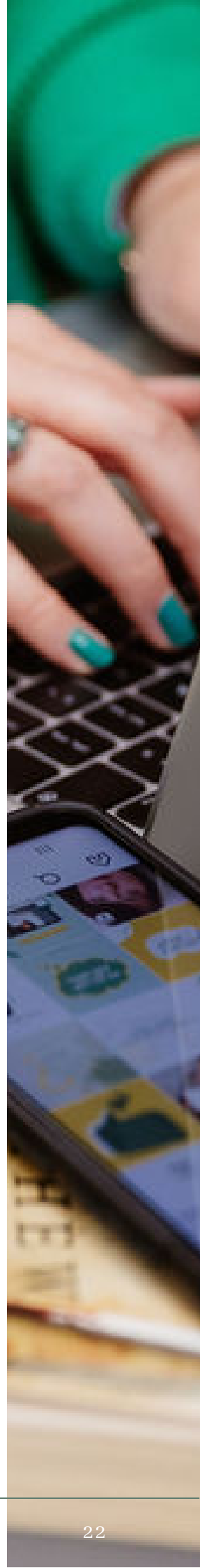
How you divide your time for this step is up to you. You can set aside a day or two to focus primarily on this task, or you can spread the 6 or so hours you need for it over a couple of weeks.

Polish - detailed revision

If you have an inner critic or inner perfectionist, you now get to let them out to play - for a little while. Do not let this revision become a stalling point.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Begin by running spell check. Also, if there are any words you know you consistently mistype, run a check for those (use the search tool for this - PC: ctrl+f; Mac: comand+f). For example, I usually type *form* when I mean *from*, so I'd run a search for *form* to find all the instances in which I did this - spell check can't help you when you spell the wrong word correctly.



Polish - continued

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Next, it's time to attempt the impossible: proofread your own work. We can't really do that because we're too clever for our own good - our brains will insist on seeing what we meant to type, not what's actually on the screen. Here are three ways you can improve your ability to proofread your book - choose one (don't do all 3, you have other things to do and a life to live):

1. Read each chapter from the last sentence to the first. This makes you think about the act of reading and thus increases your chance of seeing sentence level errors, but it won't help you judge the flow of your book.
2. Read your book out loud to yourself. For some reason, when we read out loud, we're more likely to see what's actually on the page/screen instead of seeing what we meant to type. Pause to fix mistakes as you hear them.
3. Have your computer read your book to you as you follow along with the text - you're more likely to hear mistakes than see them. Pause to fix mistakes as you hear them. Both [Microsoft Word](#) and [Google Docs](#) have this feature (click the links in this sentence to find out how to use it).



Polish - continued

As with the first revision, how you approach this is up to you - make it your primary focus for a day or two, or spread the work out over a couple of weeks.

*"We're too clever
for our own good!"*



These two revisions will take about 12 hours to complete. If you haven't revised text in these ways before, it will be easier if you're working with a coach. If you're on your own, just remember to be patient with yourself - I'm sure you can do it!



BETA READERS – 5 ACTIVE HOURS

Once your draft is as clean as you can reasonably make it, send it to your beta readers.

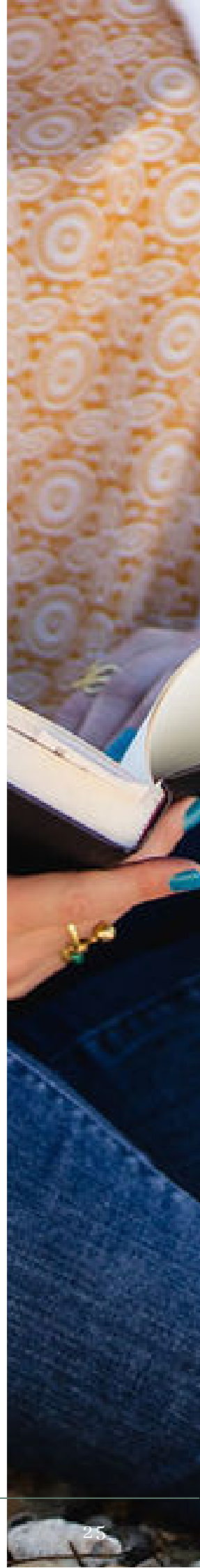
To help your beta readers understand what you need from them (and to make it clear that you don't expect them to edit/proofread your book), send them a list of questions to respond to. In that email, you can also mention that once you've responded to their feedback, you'll be sending your manuscript to a professional editor.

Help your beta readers help you

Below you'll find the questions I send my beta readers (feel free to copy them or to adjust them to suit your book):

- Does the book make sense?
- Are there any points in the book where you feel like I've skipped a step or assumed you have knowledge that you don't?
- Are there any points in the book where you feel like I'm explaining the obvious?
- How is my tone? Overly familiar, too stuffy, just right?
- What did you learn from the book?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me so I can make the book as useful to my readers as possible?

Give your beta readers 4 weeks to read your draft and respond to your questions.



Take a calming breath

When you get your book back from them, take a deep breath and calmly read through all of their feedback.

As you read it, make note of any changes they suggest that you agree with (you are not required to take all of their suggestions).

When you finish, send your book to your editor.

REMEMBER: THIS IS
YOUR BOOK – ONLY
MAKE THE CHANGES
YOU WANT TO MAKE.



Active time: 5 hours; Inactive time: 4 weeks.

Choosing good beta readers and dealing with their feedback is easier for many writers if they have the support of a coach to be there to remind them that suggestions for change does not mean the book is terrible.



EDITOR - 8 ACTIVE HOURS

Your editor will need at least 4 weeks with your book. If you need a tighter turnaround for some reason, expect to pay significantly more (like 2 to 3 times more).

When you get your draft back from your editor you'll need about 8 hours to go through all of their changes. Do not just blindly accept all changes - you need to look at each one to make sure you agree.

Editors are people too

Yes, your editor is a professional, but they are also human. They can make mistakes or misunderstand the point you're trying to make. This is your book - you must make the final decision on each edit.

Take regular breaks

Unless you're an experienced editor who's used to looking at fine details and edits for hours on end, plan to break the 8 or so hours you'll need for this task into smaller chunks - 30 to 45 minutes at a stretch.



Active time: 8 hours; Inactive time: 4 weeks.

Take your time in going through your edits. Also, remember that your editor is making your book better, not judging you!



YOU'RE READY TO FORMAT

Congratulations! You've cleaned up your text! Now, your book is ready for formatting.

If you're hiring a book formatter or self-publishing consultant, it's time to send the manuscript to them!

If you're doing it yourself, it's time to start that process. I have a course that can help you do this (assuming your book is mostly text-based): *Format and Publish Your Book*. In it, I show you how to use Atticus to format it and then how to publish to both IngramSpark and Amazon.

You can learn more about the course here:

<https://ewc.coach/format-and-publish-your-book/>



How long this takes is variable.

By yourself without any support, it could take a few days; with my course, it should take less time. If you outsource it, you'll have almost no active time, but you may have to wait several weeks for the work to be done.



*Learn more about how
you can work with me!*



Click the button below to learn how I can support you. Can't afford to hire me as a coach? No worries, I'll point you to some useful blog posts. Looking for a supportive small group programme - I have a couple for you to choose between. Know you need a coach, but hate group programmes? Check out my 1:1 options!

When you click the button you'll be taken to a page where my book coaching resources and packages are arranged from free DIY resources to all-inclusive coaching programmes.

Learn more

What my clients say



ABBIE BROAD

Author of *Does It Really Need to Be This Hard?: The story of how I overcame the 7 Big Struggles for Women in Business and turned my passion into profit*

Writing a book for my business just seemed to make so much sense. As it not only helped me to exorcise a lot of my own limitations it also befitted my clients past, present and future.

It has served as an endless resource for content, and it is an excellent tool for building know like and trust. I am only just scratching the surface of all the amazing ways in which to utilize the book and every day it brings me joy and confidence to know that my story can help others.

I could not have done it without the incredible support and expertise of Jennifer Jones. My business looks and feels like a success now thanks to her. Everyone should have a book for their business.

What my clients say



VIE PORTLAND

Author of *La Vie Est Belle: Learning to live hopefully ever after*

I was doing some decluttering recently and I found a notebook where I had, once again, started writing my book and, again, not gone any further than a few paragraphs.

Writing a book was something I always hoped I would do but didn't think it would actually happen; now I am receiving coaching from Jennifer, and it's actually happening! I very much doubt I would be in this position, where I am close to publishing, were it not for her. I'm going to be an author!

Vie has also written two beautiful children's books, but I didn't coach those: *Where Are We Going?* and *Who Am I?*

The main characters in both books are Emily and her mum. The two go on many imaginary adventures; the books are suitable for ages 3 to 7.