

Writing Your Way to the Top

Notes for FOTB 2006 presentation by Snow Dowd & Robert Reinhardt

Intro. LOOKING FOR WAYS TO BRANCH OUT?

Do you feel like you've reached a point in your career where you need more industry exposure? After years of establishing a large portfolio of work, many designers and developers don't know the steps they can take to further their careers. Writing is a crucial part of the industry profile that many successful technical and creative people rely on to generate business and enhance their professional credibility.

A. WHY WRITE?

Writing can boost your business and keep you ahead of the curve.

Share your passion and compound the investment you've made to develop your skills:

If you are passionate about what you do, writing is a natural extension of your professional practice. If you live and breathe something you might as well write it too. By making an effort to share what you've learned, you will connect with people who in turn help you grow.

Validate your knowledge and sharpen your skills:

Writing will give you the structure and focus to really explore your ideas and methodologies in a way that you may not be able to while you are rushing from project to project. As you consider how to pass your knowledge on to others, you will reinforce your skills and confront your weak areas.

Get in the trenches and learn from others as you research:

You'll be able to work with the newest version of any software that is relevant to your writing topic if you have the support of a publisher with established contacts. If you are writing about a product that is not yet on the market (which is often the case), you will have the mixed blessing of being a beta (or even alpha) tester and will be part of the group of people who see new features first. These people are die-hards and they can be your best allies as you all work your way through new features and stomp out killer bugs. This is a privileged way to learn but it's also painful. Beta programs run on a timeline that you can't control and it can be frustrating to keep up with your writing deadlines while fulfilling the expectations of the beta program and fending off your anxious editor. New releases are often dropped before long weekends or holidays so that you'll have more "quality" testing time.

Stay on the cutting edge and guide clients forward:

If you write about the tools you use, you'll be forced to stay current or even ahead of the curve and that will give you an advantage with clients. (Even if they don't want the newest version, they'll value that you can look ahead and advise them on what to expect in the near future.)

Branch out from production work into consulting or teaching:

A writing deadline (and the structure of a specific writing project or proposal) will motivate you to start thinking about what you know and how to get it out of your head and down on paper.

Content created for books or articles can be a great foundation for workshop or presentation material. A good book TOC or a solid tutorial can double as a curriculum outline for a class or workshop.

Expand your profile and enhance your career:

Potential clients are often more impressed by a byline than they are by a portfolio (esp. if they are looking for someone to train or teach). Writing what you know shows that you are able to share information and help others to learn the tools. Not everyone who does amazing work is able to articulate how they do it or help other people problem-solve.

Writing is also a critical skill that may determine how far you can go within a company. If you can write, you will have a much better chance of moving into a more senior position that allows you to have more influence on creative direction or technical strategy rather than just doing production.

You CAN make money even if your book isn't a best seller:

You'll be paid an advance to write the book so even if sales are less than expected, and the book doesn't "earn out" (bring in money beyond what it cost the publisher to produce), you won't go home empty-handed. If you are fast at what you do, the advance can make it worth your time even if it isn't as much as you'd make with good production gigs. The true payback is seen if you can use the writing as a foundation for other things: conferences, consulting, teaching, landing better clients, etc.

Many writers make more money teaching and consulting than they do from their actual royalties or advances. Being a published author supports your credibility with clients and makes it easier to "justify" top-tier (or next tier) rates when you do other projects.

No matter what level you are at in your career, writing can support your professional practice and create new opportunities:

If nothing else, writing gives you a better chance of getting out of the rut of having to jockey for work based on competitive bids and closer to the freedom of focusing on doing what you do best.

Even if you don't earn more money or become world famous, you WILL have the chance to make new connections that may lead to interesting collaborations, new job opportunities or even some good friends.

B. HOW COMPUTER & DESIGN BOOKS GET WRITTEN

Quickly: Unlike a novel or academic thesis that might take years, technical books usually have a very short shelf life so they have to get written fast.

Whether you develop a book idea on your own or are approached by a publisher or agent to do a book, you will usually have only a few months to get the whole thing finished including artwork and project examples. Books often take longer to print than they do to write. (Which is why you may want to consider some of the alternatives to traditional publishing...which we'll touch on at the end of our presentation.)

With a team: Depending on the publisher, you will have an acquisitions editor, a project editor, a few copy editors and one or more technical editors. Many books are written by a group of people in hopes that the content will be finished more quickly.

The good news is that you will have lots of help - on top of the team of editors, publishers provide a staff of book designers and graphics prep people. The bad news is that these people may care less about your book than you do and if anything is done poorly, it's your name that readers will attach the blame to.

If you start falling behind on deadlines, the publisher may bring in other people to help you finish and will take their pay out of your future royalties. If you have some power, you will have a choice about who helps you and you may be able to fight for more time or an adjusted TOC rather than contributors...if not, you'll have to make the best of it unless you want to break your contract. In our experience, contributors have just as much chance of slowing a project down as they do of speeding it up because they may come on board with little or no knowledge of the content.

In series: In most cases, books are developed as part of a larger series to make marketing dollars go further and to capitalize on the success and reader recognition of past books.

Sticking to a template for everything from the cover designs to the book structure and the tone or style of the content makes it easier for a publisher to get books out the door quickly with consistency and (hopefully) quality.

Every once in a while, a standalone book will hit on an untapped market and do very well. If you are determined to make a name for yourself, creating your own book with a unique look and the potential to expand into your own series is an ambitious goal.

Doing a great job on a specific edition of an established series is a much safer bet and will allow you to win readers over even if they've never heard of you. Hopefully, you can work within the design template of the existing series while still delivering content that you are proud to put your name on.

Even in a series, a book can be a stand-alone effort or a reoccurring edition tied to content that has to be updated on a regular basis.

In the best-case scenario the series makes you look great without all the sweat of reinventing the wheel. You can benefit from a proven formula and rely on style sheets and structure guidelines to keep your content clean and good-looking without too much stress or hassle with production battles. If it's a well-established series, the production will be relatively painless and you have a good chance of wide distribution (translations, etc.) and solid sales even with your first book.

In the worst-case scenario, you will have to work extra hard to overcome the limitations of a template and you may have to live with design elements or a marketing angle that makes you cringe. Publishers will sometimes be flexible and allow you to modify the template to suit your style or content, but in most cases it's an uphill battle and if the series is just a bad fit for your content or personality than trying to make it fit will be much harder than just starting from scratch.

If you write tutorials or articles rather than books, you will run into many of the same issues. Some contexts will have strict editorial guidelines and templates that have the potential to make your job easier or much more painful (depending on how they suit you). Other contexts allow you to deliver content in pretty much any style or form that you see fit. Unless you are an eccentric genius, it will still be helpful to refer to solid work as a model for effective content that connects with the audience you are trying to reach.

C. WHO WRITES COMPUTER BOOKS?

AUTHOR PROFILES:

People who write books come from a wide variety of backgrounds and angles. The consistent factor for success is getting support from a good publisher and connecting with an audience (obviously).

Rock star - has made a name by doing high-profile work. Winning awards, speaking at conferences, landing big clients. May not be very interested in writing but has lots of experience and can lend luster to a project. Often works with a co-writer or "ghost writer" or very involved editor who makes sure all the ideas and beautiful screen shots are organized into something that resembles a book. Content is not usually product-specific. May be done by a studio rather than by a single designer. Sometimes like a printed and

bound version of a big portfolio. Also known as a vanity project. Success of book depends on visual impact, connecting with “fans” and having a strong (if not always unique) style that others want to emulate. *See Bruce Mau (Life Style), David Carson (The End of Print, etc.),

Philosopher - may be known by others in the industry or may just have big ideas that others can connect with. May be logical and consistent or wildly eccentric: as long as they have a very strong point of view. Can elucidate relevant issues and bring clarity (or controversy) to current professional practices. Does not have to have production experience or speak to specific technical issues, but MUST offer answers to common questions or provoke thought and dialog that will help people to be better at what they do. Can be text-heavy and theory-driven or visual and pattern-driven but must somehow illustrate and explain some big ideas, establish or critique a philosophy. See Jakob Nielsen, Marty Neumeier (The Brand Gap), Steve Krug (Don’t Make Me Think), Hillman Curtis (MTIV, On Creating Short Films...)

Industry Insider - works with the tools in real-world situations. Understands and addresses the needs of people who are looking for practical or step-by-step information that they can apply in their own daily work. May use “sample” projects to demonstrate techniques rather than real client case studies or portfolio-worthy work. Hopefully brings enough experience to the table that readers can learn best practices and some tips and tricks that go beyond standard documentation. No special requirement for personality or style, but if you have that you may move into philosopher or rock star status as you build an audience. *See Deke McLelland, Lynda Weinman, Kelly GoTo as well as most none name-brand technical authors.

Professional - May have some previous knowledge (usually) but often learns the tool as they write about it and doesn’t necessarily use the tool outside of researching/beta testing and creating examples for books or documentation. Could work on a series of related books but could also jump from one topic to another depending on what publishers are looking for or what their agent has on the table at the time. May also teach or do consulting but does not rely on name recognition to earn a living. Sometimes freelance but usually in-house with a company (Adobe, Microsoft) or have an in with a specific publisher...usually earned by working on more than one book. May start as an editor or contributor on another author’s book. If you hit the jackpot you land a book in a well-branded series (Dummies, Visual QuickStart Guide, etc.)

Contributor - Have ideas, expertise and work to share but don’t have the time or interest to complete a book project. Write tutorials or chapters to contribute to other people’s books. Write editorial or how-to content for online forums or blogs or personal site(s). Often not paid but still write for enjoyment and the reward of connecting with the community and/or getting free stuff (books/software/etc.)

POTENTIAL AUTHOR INDICATORS:

Signs that you should be writing professionally aside from being a world-famous designer or top-level programmer

You have a good foundation of expertise - you've got knowledge and experience with a popular tool or you've got specialized interest in a niche product or unique workflow that has potential for broader appeal.

AND/OR

You enjoy research - keeping on top of trends and working your way around the hype to get the real story on a new product or workflow. You are always curious about new products, current professional strategies and emerging markets.

People ask for your opinion on technology and/or strategy - you stay in touch with your community and your peers. You are good at explaining things and enjoy dialog and answering questions.

You have an opinion and you like to share it - you are not afraid to put yourself on the line by asserting your point of view and you are ready to back it up with case studies or examples.

You write long emails or maintain a blog - You can sit at your computer for 10 hours a day and type more than 50 words per minute. You prefer typing to talking.

You actually enjoy writing documentation and doing project pitches - organizing content and describing functionality are not boring to you and you get excited about sharing ideas with other people.

D. HOW TO GET STARTED

Practical steps you can take to get in the publishing game and make writing part of a smart strategy for a long and rewarding career.

FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT TO WRITE ABOUT

Research existing books and identify a series that would be a good fit or a gap in the market that you could fill:

Keep in mind that publishers like titles that will compliment other books in their own roster and compete with books by other publishers. Don't be afraid to be bold...if a book is on the shelf and you think it does a really poor job of covering a topic, demonstrate how you would do it better and why readers would appreciate the change. This strategy can work with the original publisher or with a competitor.

Find your audience and nail down their demographics:

The more evidence you can gather that your topic or approach to the topic will find a solid audience, the better chance you'll have of getting a deal. Show that you know who the audience is and why they will want to buy your book. It can be a very broad audience or a very specialized audience (as long as the numbers add up).

ANALYZE YOUR OPTIONS FOR GETTING PUBLISHED

Be strategic about the form you choose for your content:

If you are brilliant enough to identify a whole new topic that has never been written about, don't assume that it will be a sure thing. It could be a goldmine or a total waste of time...you'll want to be sure that there are lots of other people out there interested enough in the topic to buy your book...and that they are the kind of people who actually buy books...if not, consider the best way to reach the audience. DVD or Web-based content might be a better way to go.

Use the proposal form (available online from most publishers) of your favorite or target publisher to format your ideas:

The most important aspect of your pitch is convincing the publisher that they will make money if they publish your book...or convincing an agent that it will be worth their time to shop your proposal around.

Note: We spoke with a rep from O'Reilly publishing after a presentation in Toronto and he let us know that recent shifts in the tech publishing market have caused publishers to be more open to projects that are author designed and produced. If you have the tools (InDesign/InCopy) to do a complete layout of your content and deliver it to the publisher ready for press they may pick it up and you will have the advantage of a higher royalty rate and a quicker production timeline. This is still a little unusual but if you have the chops to make it work, it might your way onto the shelf.

Decide if you want to get an agent or not (pros/cons):

This can be a strategy that you choose or it may just work itself out one way or another. If a publisher just picks you up and takes care of you, you may never need to worry about having an agent. If you have trouble finding a good outlet for your content or you feel nervous about the contracts, you may find it helpful to get an agent. You can always get an agent down the road if writing becomes a large part of your business and you need help landing and managing multiple projects.

BE PERSISTENT

Blog and/or post to forums: become known for being helpful and knowledgeable and you may be recruited to write documentation or participate in beta programs.

Contact authors: give them good feedback on their content and they recommend you for a project or contract you as a tech editor or contributor.

Consider alternatives: if your first pitch doesn't get picked up see if you can develop a new angle on the material or find an alternative format for the content.

E. BIG PLAYERS IN TECH PUBLISHING

O'Reilly (Definitive Guides, Cookbook series)
<http://oreilly.com/oreilly/author/intro.csp>

Peachpit (New Riders, Adobe, Macromedia, TechTV, Apple Pro Training, etc.)
http://www.peachpit.com/about/write_for_us.asp

Wiley (Bible series, Dummies series)
<http://ca.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-8597.html>

Friends of Ed (New Masters series, Studio series, standalone titles)
<http://www.friendsofed.com/contact.html#write>
(Now backed by Apress)

F. AGENTS: WHO NEEDS 'EM?

Not all authors choose to work with an agent but some swear by them and expand their writing careers as a result of agency support.

Pros:

- Bring projects to you
- Know how to work with the publisher
- Help to get fair advances and realistic timelines
- Handle paperwork with publisher and follow up on pay-outs and royalty statements, etc.
- Help manage contributors and co-authors
- Support and guide you as you develop your career

Cons:

- Take a cut even on projects you find yourself
- Don't always fulfill required duties
- Successful agents are busy agents
- Hard to break up with once you sign on
- A good publisher will take care of you anyway

G. LITERARY AGENCIES TO CONSIDER (US-based)

Agency web sites can be a great source of information and resources for authors. You will find author bios, case studies, tips for proposals and strategies for a successful writing career. (Studio B is one of the best we've found.) If you do want to connect with an agent, take time to research the titles they've handled and make sure they are a good fit for the work you do.

Waterside

<http://www.waterside.com/proposalguide.html>

LaunchBooks (founded by David Fugate, formerly at Waterside)

<http://www.launchbooks.com/submissions.html>

Studio B

<http://www.studiob.com/authors>

H. WHAT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO WRITE A BOOK?

Alternatives to traditional publishing are gaining ground and may be a better fit for your content or your presentation style or just a good way to extend the life of your printed content:

- **Safari Bookshelf:** rough cut (in-process publishing)
- **Downloads/subscription-based content:** Lynda.com, CommunityMX, Apress Ebooks)
- **DVD/Video** training or text-based content/workbooks for workshops
- **Editorial content** or **tutorials** for magazines or online journals
- **Documentation** or help/example files for specific products (online or built-in)

I. WHAT'S NEXT?

Care and feeding of readers is critical to continued success:

- Maintain a web site or forum to support your content
- Answer emails
- Convert angry critics into loyal fans
- Keep an eye out for talent you can nurture

Don't forget to nurture yourself!

- Feed your brain and keep your skills fresh so that you will be ready for the next project and will have new ideas to contribute.

Note about the authors:

Robert Reinhardt & Snow Dowd are authors of the Flash Bible series and partners at [theMAKERS] in Portland, Oregon. Robert is also a writing partner at CommunityMX and VP of the Multimedia Platforms Group at SCHEMATIC (Los Angeles, New York).