The Writer's Technology Companion
Desk-Side Guide to

Writing Ebooks

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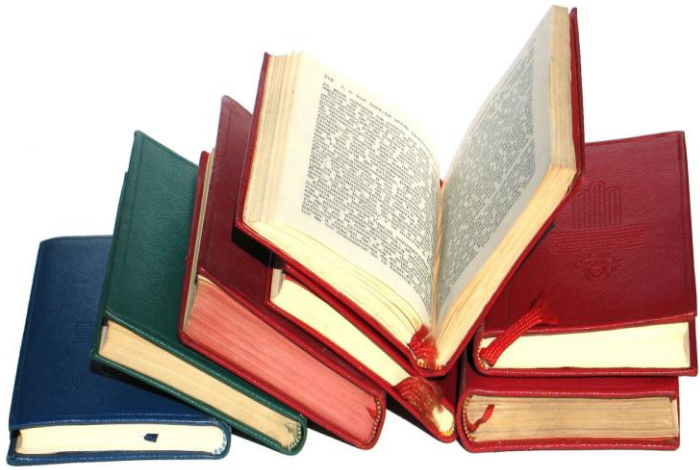
Chapter 1

Why Ebooks?



An ebook is a book, article, or other self-contained written material that is circulated electronically, usually over the web. Although they've been slow to catch on -- few people relish the thought of reading a novel-length book on their computer screen -- ebooks have started to gain a lot of popularity with the release of high-quality ebook reading devices like Amazon's Kindle.

Lots of writers have written and distributed ebooks, for various reasons:

- **To make money:** Since an ebook (unlike a website) is a discrete unit, it can be sold.
- **To offer samples:** Many writers give away a few chapters of their work to get people "hooked" and convince them to buy their book.
- **To build awareness:** Authors have given away ebooks to win fans -- hopefully they'll buy your next book.

- **To spread information:** Sometimes you have a topic that you want to write about that isn't worthwhile to publish -- it's either too short to make a full book worthwhile or the audience is too small. Ebook costs are lower (often zero) so publishing via ebook often makes better sense.
- **To show reader appreciation:** Some writers publish ebooks as freebies to thank their readers for their patronage.
- **To promote other products:** Ebooks can be filled with links to your website, to your other books on Amazon, or anywhere else on the Web.
- **To get numbers:** An unestablished writer looks good if s/he can go to a publisher showing that they've sold 10,000 copies of their ebook.
- **To have control:** An ebook allows a writer to control the presentation of their work in a way that posting it on the web doesn't.
- **To self-publish cheaply:** With their low investment, ebooks are an attractive alternative to traditional self-publishing.
- **To supplement paper publication:** Many authors offer the choice of an ebook alongside their traditional paper copies, for readers who use ebook devices, prefer to read on their computer, or just want the instant gratification of downloading a book instead of waiting for it to be mailed.

I'm sure there are other reasons I haven't even thought of, too. The main point is that **producing and distributing ebooks is fairly cheap, and can make you some money either directly (through sales) or indirectly (through promoting your "brand")**.

Just as there are a lot of reasons to write ebooks, there are a lot of things to write ebooks about. Of course, you could just transform any unsold book-length manuscript into an ebook (I say "unsold" because you probably don't want to compete with the publisher of your paper books -- and may no have the legal right to according to your publishing contract). But **the ebook format is ideal for shorter works**, too -- a 30-page "how to" book, a sampler of short stories, a short personal narrative, or a collection of travel photos.

An ebook is an opportunity for you to establish your expertise in your field or niche without replacing your "bread and butter" writing. Think about the things that you do well and offer up a representative sample. Just like writing a traditional book, the choice of topics is limited only by your knowledge and taste and the demand you are trying to fill. If there's a topic you've always thought about writing on but couldn't imagine filling 250 pages with it, consider writing an ebook instead.

Chapter 2

Writing Your Ebook

Once you've decided on a topic for your ebook, you have to sit down and write it. For the most part, ebook writing is the same as any other writing, but there are a few special considerations. Since your book will most likely be read on a screen of some sort (readers could print it out, but that's a lot of ink and paper!), you'll want to incorporate some of the strategies you use to write for the web.

One thing to pay attention to is structure. Readers won't be able to easily flip to the table of contents to see what's coming up or where they're at in the grand scheme of things, so it pays to reiterate the table of contents periodically, for instance by outlining each chapter on the first page of the chapter. Use clear subheads throughout your work, too.

Although this won't apply as much to literary works, in non-fiction you'll want to use shorter paragraphs that can be scanned easily. **Use boldfaced text for key points**. Organize multiple points into bulleted lists. Generally keep in mind what the experience of reading on-screen is and cater to it as much as possible.

One thing you can do in an ebook that you can't do well in a paper book is to add interactive elements. **Use links to web content to extend your document** -- you can link to definitions and encyclopedia articles, other books, and of course your own website. You can also embed short videos, sound files, and other interactive elements, but make sure they add to the value of the ebook -- don't do it just because you can!

As with any other writing, make sure you plan your work, outline, do your research, and so on. Even if you intend to give your ebook away for free, **make sure you hold to the same high standards you expect of all your work**.

Chapter 3

Producing Your Ebook

Once you've written your ebook manuscript, you need to get into shape for release. While there are ebook creation programs out there that will turn your ebook into a self-contained executable program, I advise against this. First of all, they rarely look all that good, and they force your reader to use a software interface they may not be familiar with. More importantly, executable files can contain viruses, and are often blocked by email programs, corporate networks, and even the operating system itself. No point in giving our readers a security scare when they're about to read your book.

Instead, **I suggest saving your file as a plain-jane PDF file**. While you could use professional layout software like Adobe's InDesign and Acrobat to produce your final text, these programs cost hundreds of dollars and are difficult to learn. Instead, I recommend using your word processor of choice and a free PDF creator (I recommend PDF Forge's PDF Creator); some word processors, like Word 2007 (using the "Save as PDF" addon) and OpenOffice.org can save PDFs themselves.

You'll need to set up you pages with the end result in mind. Wide text columns can be harder to read, especially on screen, so set your page sizes to something more book-like. I set my pages at 6" wide by 9" tall, with a ¾-inch margin all around. This allows

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Chapter 4

Distributing Your Ebook

OK, you've written an ebook, fixed all the typos, formatted it nicely, and are ready to go. Now what? How do you get it to an audience?

Well, that depends on your ultimate goal. Are you planning to give your ebook away, or do you want to sell it? Let's look at both options separately.

Giving it away

If you're going to give your ebook away, you could just upload it to your site, add a link to the sidebar, and be done with it. We'll talk about promoting it in the next post, but for now, make sure it's clearly marked (the word "FREE" in all caps, bold-faced, in giant red letters never fails to attract attention!) and why people should want to read it.

A better bet might be to give it its own page. Write up a short description, add some testimonials if you have them (and update the page if you *get* any), and add the page to your site's main menu.

Or maybe you want to give it away but still get something in return. **You could offer the ebook as an incentive to sign up for your newsletter, if you have one** -- attach the file to the automatic reply they get when they sign up. Or you could use it to drive subscriptions to your RSS feed -- Remarkablogger shows you how to add a link to your ebook to your RSS feed. Tell them they'll get the link once they've subscribed.

Selling your ebook

Selling an ebook takes a little more work -- it is, after all, a business endeavor -- but, of course, you get paid for it. If you already have a shopping cart on your site (we'll talk about that in a future post), you could sell it directly. That's probably more than most writers are willing to deal with, though, so here are a couple of third-party services that can handle some or all of the details of the sale for you.

- **PayPal:** If you don't mind doing the order fulfillment yourself, you could add a Paypal "Buy Now" button to your site. Every day, log in, see what new orders have been placed, and email them a copy of your ebook.

- **Lulu:** If you expect to sell more than a few copies a day, you'll want order fulfillment along with payment processing. Lulu is a print-on-demand service that also offers ebooks; you'll need to create an account, upload your ebook, and charge enough to cover Lulu's per-book fee and commission. Your buyers will receive their ebook directly from Lulu. Lulu does paper copies, too, so you can offer your work in both formats if you like.

- **e-Junkie:** It's not free, but for $5 US a month, e-Junkie will host a shopping cart for you and handle the order fulfillment, providing your buyers with a download link to get the ebook from after they've paid. E-Junkie offers other useful services for that $5/month, including the ability to create affiliate links so other sites can sell your ebook -- for a cut, of course.

I'm sure there are other services I don't know about, but **beware, too -- for some reason writers have always been seen as likely**

targets for scams. Make sure that a) you don't have to pay for services you don't need (like editing or layout), b) you aren't turning over any copyrights and you retain full ownership of your ebook, and c) you aren't required to pay for a certain number of sales until they're actually made. Thoroughly research any ebook publisher or distributor; Googling their name plus "scam", "fraud", and similar words will likely turn up what you need to know about any shady dealers.

Chapter 5
Promoting Your Ebook

Unless you're Stephen King, your ebook isn't going to sell itself. You're going to need to get out there and market it a little (by which I mean, "a lot").

First of all, **make sure it's featured prominently on your site**. Write a post about it, making sure to use all the important keywords you think people doing a Google search might use to find information like yours. For a while, at least, it's a good idea to put a blurb about your ebook at the bottom of every post you write, too -- make sure our existing readers know about, and keep telling them about it!

Contact anyone you have any connection with on the web and ask them to link to your ebook, too. Send them a copy and ask them to review it. If it's for sale, offer free copies for a giveaway on somebody else's site. If you're using e-Junkie, set up an affiliate program and give people a piece of the action in exchange for their promotional efforts.

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If you're selling your ebook, make sure you add it to Amazon's Kindle store through their Digital Text Platform. You'll have to reformat it for the Kindle's screen (which is black-and-white and about the size of a pocketbook page), but you'll get your title in front of thousands of Kindle users -- a number that's hopefully going to grow a lot. You can charge whatever you want for it -- the average price at the moment seems to be $9.99 US -- and you get 35% of the sales revenue.

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