



Judy Gitenstein

Editor, Writing Coach, Secret Weapon

What to Think About When You Think About Writing a Book

(Transcript)

Hello. I'm Judy Gitenstein. I'm an editor and *hrrrriting* coach. I'm pronouncing the word *hrrrriting* the way I am because I once gave a speech to a networking group where everyone knew me except for a few guests. At the Q&A one of the guests raised his hand and asked: "What did your talk have to do with riding?" He'd sat through the whole speech thinking that I am a riding coach, a horseback riding coach. That got a good laugh and I learned the value of speaking clearly.

So.

I'm Judy Gitenstein. I'm an editor and writing coach. I help my writers start their books, revise their books, and finish their books. I'm your guide through the publishing process, from your first idea to the launch party. And by that I don't mean "lunch" party. I mean the official launch or publication of your book.

Today I want to talk about what to think about when you think about writing a book. I've been thinking about this topic for a long time, from the days when I was editor on staff at Random House and other publishers and especially now that I'm an independent editor working directly with writers, hired directly by writers.

In the beginning I made the things to think about complicated and almost existential. I've distilled them over the years to four essential questions to ask yourself. Here's what they are.

1. What's my book about?
2. Who is it for?
3. How will I tell my story?
4. What do I need to help me through the process?

That's it. Those four things. Of all the million things to think about those are the things.

Before we get going, take a deep breath. Let your shoulders drop. As of now, as of this minute, you know someone in publishing. Me. Judy Gitenstein. I'm your backstage pass. I deliver truth but in a kind and encouraging way so you know what writing is really about in a way that makes it not as scary.

So, let's get started.

ONE. What's your book about?

This is not a trick question. I will want to know plot, setting, characters, length, genre, but that's not the question I'm asking now. I'm asking what the book is about in a bigger sense.

When I do a first consultation with a writer we talk about what you're about. First we talk about what you liked to read as a kid. And I learn a little bit about what needs and situations brought you to your story—the one you're living, the one you're writing. What about your book will speak to a reader's need for the subject? What will magnetize your reader?

Here's what I mean. When I worked at Bantam Books I created a series called The Saddle Club, ironically about horseback riding. The series is still going strong after 30 years, with a younger, spinoff series, a TV show and horse figurines. But it almost didn't get published, for this reason. When I proposed the series idea to the editorial, sales, and marketing departments—and the president of Bantam—I outlined all the details: the plot, the setting, how many books were planned, what the covers would look like, the writer I had in mind to hire to write the series.

I did my homework but I didn't give the larger description. The president of Bantam asked me, "How many kids like to ride? How big a market are we talking about?"

The answer became clear. "The market is huge," I said, "because these books are about friendship. The stable is a backdrop. The stories are about the dynamic among three girls, working things out, solving personal problems. For kids, that's what life is about."

That answer did the trick. I got the money to hire the writer and develop the series, and the books have been going strong ever since.

So when I ask what your book is about, I'm asking that bigger question. What it's ABOUT in the bigger sense is what attracts your reader. This is the description that an agent is looking for. What can they use when they present to an acquiring editor? And what can the editor use when she presents to sales and marketing and the president of the publisher?

If you're trying it out in, say, an elevator speech and your listener whips his head around and his focus becomes laser sharp, that's what your book is about. That's your magnet. That's what will attract your readers.

That brings me to the second question to think about when you think about writing a book. Who is the story for?

Often when I ask that question, my author might say "everyone." It is conceivable—in another universe—that a book can be for everyone. Harry Potter turned out to be for everyone but the first and primary market was young readers. The books were published in the U.S. by Scholastic, which is a children's-only publisher. Adults read the books now, but they were not the original, intended market.

I want to mention here that the two examples I've given have been books for young readers. When I was on staff, that was my focus. Now I edit all books in all genres. And what I'm talking about relates to all writing.

So, who are your readers? Who will be drawn to your bigger story? What emotional need is drawing them to the bookshelf? Match up what you're writing to who you're writing for, so you know how to address your reader and then speak directly to that reader.

I often ask my writers to create a bio of their reader. What's their story? What do they like to do, to read, to watch? Where do they shop? I tell my writers, "Pick one person who represents the group, real or imagined, and think about that person when you're writing. Tell your story to that person."

So now you know what your book is about in the smaller and larger sense. You've worked out who it's for.

The third question to ask yourself is: how will I tell my story? Book length? Short Story? Film? Huffington Post column? This is something I think about when a writer sends me their material. Is it a book? Let's assume it is. Now there are a few other questions to ponder, especially if it's fiction.

Will you use first person, meaning, will the main character or another one character tell the story to the reader? If you use third person, you're using an omniscient narrator and you can show more than one point of view.

Will your prose style be formal, with a lot of narrative, which might be right for historical fiction, or will it be dialogue-heavy with contemporary language?

Will you use past tense or present tense?

Will you be a careful writer or a messy writer? Controlled or out-there? Deliberate or stream of consciousness?

The message here is you're completely in charge of your story. How do you determine all these factors that I've just mentioned? A really interesting way is to do a little self-exploration. Take the task with you out for a walk or sit silently with it inside or outside. Do nothing. Be very still. And listen. You may be surprised. It's possible that the first sentence, or a sentence will come to you that will have all the questions answered. It's possible that a voice in your head will tell you where to start the story. It's your story, after all, and it's inside you. You can hear it if you listen. That's a lesson it took me years to learn. You'll get the most done by doing the least.

I often will set aside a manuscript I'm editing and head over to the Hudson River. I live in New York. It's amazing that almost every time I head out, the answer I'm looking for comes to me as I'm walking or looking out at the water or generally not sitting and editing.

I always make sure I go out with a pad or access to a way to record it on my phone. It's good to have little assists like this. And that's why the fourth question to think about when you think about writing a book is:

What do I need to help me through the process?

When you're writing you spend a lot of time inside yourself and it's good to get outside of yourself to take a break and let the story breathe. So I say: do whatever works for you to help you through the process.

- Join a writer's group. Share your work
- Go to a writer's room to do your work surrounded by other writers
- Pick a writing buddy to run with and to be accountable to
- Go to a library. A public library or a university library. A Starbucks. Do whatever will keep you refreshed and the story aerated
- Take a nap
- Work out
- Get a massage
- Be mindful and mindless at the same time
- Do dishes

I do my laundry and don't think about what I'm working on. I come back upstairs with answers, ideas, and neatly folded clean clothing.

All the time I spend not working I'm spending processing so that when I am working I get so much done. I walk the length of the High Line, which is an elevated park that stretches about a miles and a half close to the Hudson. I do qigong and Feldenkrais. I take naps. You do what works for you.

So . . .

1. What's my book about?
2. Who is it for?

3. How will I tell my story?
4. What do I need to help me through the process?

To my mind, addressing these questions leads you to your authentic voice. It allows you to tell your story in the deepest, most sincere way. From your heart to the reader's heart. And that, really, is what good writing is about. Authentic. Emotional. Slightly raw. Vulnerable.

I've just given you my answer to the question, "What is this talk really about?" Writing is not about the words. It's about the emotion behind the words. I could give this talk many different times and never use the same words twice. But the same things still apply: just be you. live your life. Write your book. Find your truth by thinking, living, writing.

To me the pleasure is the journey of the exploration of your story with you and celebrating with you when you make your discoveries. That's what's kept me in the publishing industry for more than forty years. I love the process. I love the mindset. I love helping writers get in lane. I love talking with writers that first time, listening to a recollection and jumping in sometimes, interrupting you sometimes to say: "That's your story." And it will be your truest, most essential, most authentic story.

That's the process. Now, a process doesn't become a process until you start it. So . . . start your book, whether it's your first or your tenth. Start simply. Quietly. One day. Go where it takes you. And know that I'm here when you need me.

[Visit my website.](#)

J-U-D-Y-G-I-T-E-N-S-T-E-I-N dot com.

Join my mailing list. You can also join my list by texting SECRETWEAPON (ONE WORD) TO: 33-444.

I have so much more to share with you, and so many things planned upcoming that I am so excited about. In the meantime I've prepared a thank-you gift called "What Your Editor Is Thinking: A View from the Other Side of the Desk."

It's my rundown on editors. I am one, after all. What I'm thinking. What the editor you're working with wants and needs. The editor you'd like to work with, the one you'd like to approach at a writer's conference. The one you'd like to address a query letter to.

The fact is your editor wants you to do well and wants your book to sell well because she or he wants to do well too. But your editor doesn't have a lot of time to interact with you. Today's video will help you get an editor's attention and the PDF I'll send you will help you know how to use your time when you have an editor's attention. All the years I sat on the other side of the desk I so appreciated writers who used our time together wisely.

So, visit my site, join my list, get my “freebie” and make your way boldly in the publishing arena. As of this minute you are officially part of my posse. I’m Judy Gitenstein. Editor, writing coach, and now your secret weapon. Thank you.

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