

## THE WHAT AND THE WHY OF NONFICTION

The variety of nonfiction titles is vast and varied. The category spans writing from journalism to the most sensitive memoir, with how-to, self-help, history, erudite scholarly treatises and text books (to mention just a few) included in this category.

With a range that large, it is no wonder that nonfiction has overtaken fiction in popularity. The latest sales figures for books indicate that in 2007 nonfiction hardcovers outpaced sales of fiction by a little more than 5 million units, according to **Nielsen BookScan**. You might also be interested to learn that the **Authors Guild** considers a fiction book successful if it sells 5,000 copies. It sets the mark at 7,500 copies for nonfiction.

Of course, the distinction between these two categories of writing is gradually diminishing. Perhaps the most dramatic departure is the number of memoirists who have been found to play pretty loose with the truth, although memoirs are expected to be factual and confirmable. Those who craft books that are offered as historical reality often add dialogue that they feel honestly is appropriate to the events in which it takes place. Many novelists base their tales on real life happenings, but they carefully avoid detail that could expose them to an invasion of privacy charge.

### Freelancing Articles

Many nonfiction hopefuls launch their careers by writing articles for newspapers, magazines and even scholarly periodicals. Most of them believe that it is far easier to take a specific subject and concentrate on a limited aspect of it in an article than it is to write a book on the broader subject. However, other feel that writing a book is an easier task, albeit a good deal longer, because it is often very difficult to condense your thinking into the limits of an article of 1,000 to 2,500 words.

After churning out more than 750 articles, I tend to agree with both sides of the discussion. The great advantage of writing articles is that it does not require the same level of expertise and experience in the subject you are writing about because it is limited. Conversely, it takes rather careful planning to be able to condense all you have to say within those limitations.

One of the great benefits of article writing is the variety of subject to which you are exposed. Once you are published and recognized, you will find editors giving you a variety of assignments. I often call it an educational experience after covering topics like hot pepper farming, gambling, Christmas tree farming, real estate, travel and on and on.

I do tend to recommend to beginners that they start by crafting articles on subjects with which they are familiar. As their writing skills progress, they will find it a lot easier to sustain an extended project like a complete book.

In future columns, we will look at several specific categories of article writing like travel and digital articles designed for distribution on the Web. These deserve special attention.

### Why Tackle a Nonfiction Book?

There are a variety of reasons why authors turn to nonfiction when they plan to write a book. Number one is the ability to pass to others information on an issue that is of compelling importance to the writer. A more pragmatic reason is what I mentioned at the outset of this column: the fact that readership of nonfiction has surpassed fiction.

In this age of specialization, the public hungers for books on subjects that fascinate them.

Despite the fact that a number of books may be in print dealing with the general subject you plan to tackle, there is always room for another that approaches the topic from a fresh angle. A hook, as we often call it in the business.

As an example, I am a devoted skier. Thousands of words have been printed about skiing. But there are so many facets of the sport, even of the industry, that there is constantly room for another book for people as hungry as I to learn about the latest technique in downhill, the newest trends in ski design, the fascinating work of the Ski Patrol and so much more.

But with all of this, it is vitally important to research properly. You cannot rely on just your own knowledge. Information changes, techniques change, and you must stay up to date on every new twist and turn of the subject you write about. Readers rely on the authenticity of what you put on paper. You are in essence considered an expert when you write a book, and therefore your responsibility is a heavy one. The information that you relate must be current and accurate.

The benefit of a quality nonfiction book is shared by reader and author. Pleased by the information he/she has gained from your work, the reader now has found a new source to which to turn when in need of additional information on the subject. You, the author, brand yourself as an expert when you turn out a first-rate book, and probably will become a primary source for journalists writing on the subject who seek either more information or a quotation. So you see that content is as important, indeed in many cases far more important, than writing style and ability. Do your homework and give your reader what he/she is searching for when selecting your book.