E-books: Planning, Writing, and Publishing for Beginners

Jonna Jerome February 5, 2024

10 minute read

A well-researched e-book is an excellent way to offer value and grow credibility within your industry. This article aims to help you explore the potential of e-books, both for yourself and for your clients.

People create e-books for many reasons, including...

- increasing brand visibility.
- growing an audience and lead generation.
- generating revenue by driving traffic to other destinations.
- establishing authority and expertise in an industry.

Tackling an e-book project can feel daunting. But, if you break it down into smaller steps, it quickly becomes a manageable project. So let's start with the essentials.

6 Tips to Get You Started

When you break an e-book down into its smaller components, you'll see that approaching an e-book is a lot like writing an article... but instead of writing a single article, you write several that build on each other.

1. Define the target audience

Whether a client comes to you with a request to write an e-book, you recommend the creation of one to support their goals, or you intend to author one for your own business, the first step is the same. You first need to determine what problem the e-book will solve or what methods it will teach, and then you need to identify who it will serve.

Be as specific as possible in answering these questions. Understanding the motivations, needs, and desires of your target audience will help the book take shape more easily. You can't address everyone's pain points in one e-book, so your ideal readers must be well defined.

Home in on your audience segment so you can offer them information that is valuable and useful. Here are some questions to help you do that:

- Whom are you trying to reach?
  - What do they do for work?
  - How much money do they have?
  - How old are they?
  - Where do they live?
  - Other demographic information (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, education level, etc.)
- What issue(s) can you or your client help this target audience solve?
  - If you can, go to the source to answer this question. Augment your research by creating surveys for your audience about their interest in the topics you're considering. Also, pay attention to their comments on social media.

Your goal is to identify shared traits among the individuals you want to reach. For instance, a broad target audience might be "Women aged 20–50 who use makeup." A more specific segment would be "Professional women of color, aged 30–45, focused on aging concerns, and intrigued by high-end makeup with skin-care benefits."

Once you've nailed your target audience, take time to look at the competition. Who else in your industry is interested in this same group? What other books or e-books might this audience have read? How are they performing? What kinds of comments and reviews are they getting? Answers to these questions will help you determine how you can shape your ideas to be different or more effective.

2. Choose the topic for your e-book

From here, you should have at least one if not several potential topics that your target audience has expressed demand for or interest in. The topic should align with your (or your client's) expertise.

If you're coming up blank, you still aren't clear enough about who you are creating content for and why. If this happens, retrace your steps. Be careful not to lose your footing along the way. Think about whether your topics are valuable to your audience or more promotional in nature. Readers can spot blatantly promotional material that only pushes your service, product, or company without offering them any real value.

3. Do your research

Once you've decided on a topic, as with any writing endeavor, the next step is even more research. You can likely excel in a second career as a detective!

The breadth of research will vary by topic and what you and your client already bring to the table. Dedicate enough time to collect relevant facts and data to support your work, along with, ideally, new revelations you can offer your readers. Always credit your references from outside sources you use in your material.

4. Start your outline

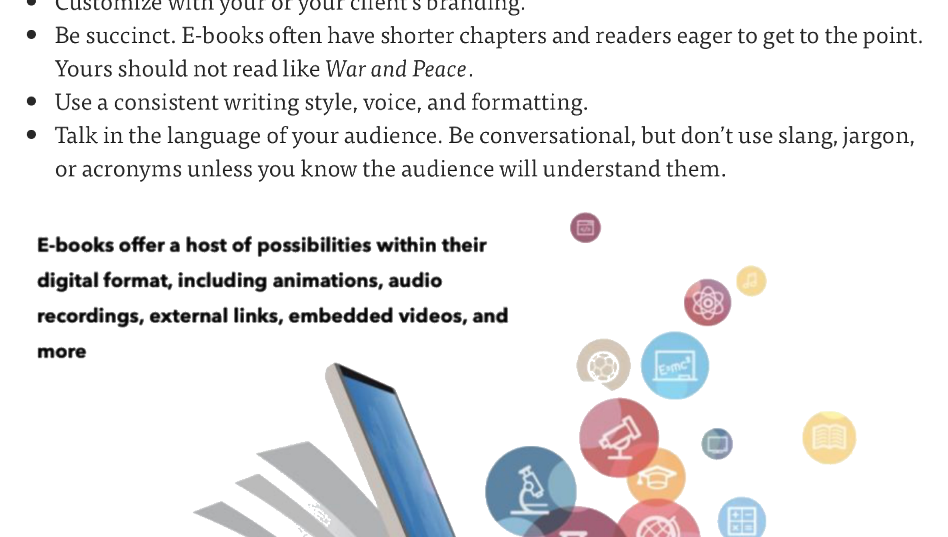
Organize all this knowledge by creating an outline. This will serve as the roadmap for your e-book. You will follow this when you start developing your chapters. Don't edit yourself too much here — just get the information down in a few sentences to expand upon later.

5. Write your content

This is the exciting part! Start by writing your chapter titles. You may already have them from your outline. Take note of these to create the table of contents. Next, expand on the chapter content.

E-books are a somewhat different animal from other content marketing projects. For those who haven't written in this medium before, here's a cheat sheet of suggestions to keep in mind while composing them:

- Create an eye-catching e-book "cover" that represents the content, whether you plan to design it yourself, use online templates, or hire someone to help you.
- Include an engaging introduction. This sets the tone so readers will know straightaway what to expect.
- Include hyperlinks and navigation features (such as a clickable table of contents).
- E-books should be more "scannable" than a traditional book. Sequential and logical order is important unless you're completing a very avant-garde piece!
- Use subheadings and sections to organize complex topics further.
- Add visuals like charts, listicles, and images to help readers digest information easily.
- Incorporate personalized interactive elements like animations, calls to action, pop-ups, voice recordings, quizzes, and videos that make this medium so unique.
- Customize with your or your client's branding.
- Be succinct. E-books often have shorter chapters and readers eager to get to the point. Yours should not read like *War and Peace*.
- Use a consistent writing style, voice, and formatting.
- Talk in the language of your audience. Be conversational, but don't use slang, jargon, or acronyms unless you know the audience will understand them.



6. Get help with editing

As a writer, you have your own editor hat. And for a lot of what you write, you may be the only one who does any editing. However, in the case of an e-book, many writers use another professional editor or proofreader. At the very least, ask a trusted colleague to do an editing pass.

In addition to using professionals to review your work, consider engaging at least one "beta reader" from the target audience for the book. Their role will be to provide feedback from the perspective of the type of readers you want to attract.

Now what?

Okay, let's say you've taken all this advice. You've put in the work, and your manuscript is ready to roll. The big question is this: Does the client want you to continue managing the project by finding a publishing platform, or are you done once you write the last word and hand over the document?

If you will be responsible for any or all of the final steps needed to get the content into digital ink, this will require more work on your part and should be added to your fee.

Publishing & Distribution: Choose Your Platform

If you are retained to take the piece to the finish line, you will need to determine the best way to get it into the virtual hands of your audience. Part of the decision about how and where to publish will depend on the project goals and overall budget.

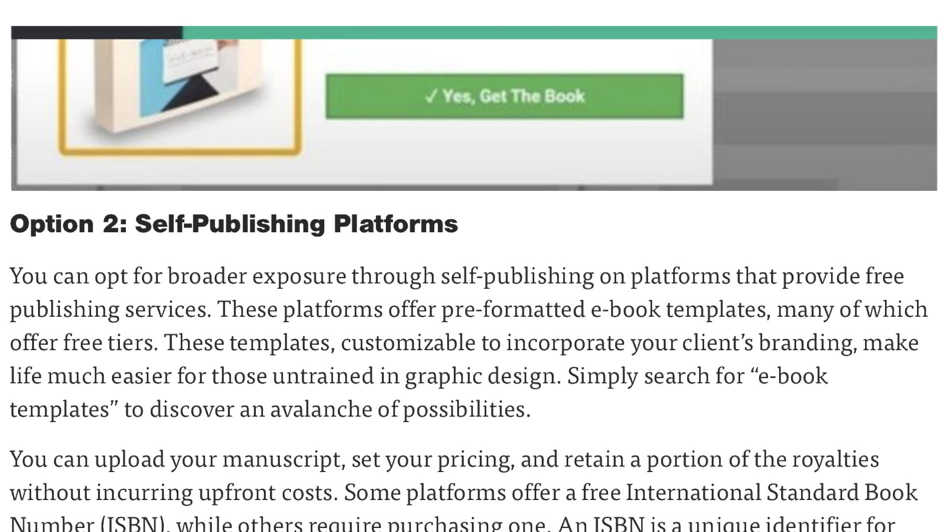
Option 1: In-house

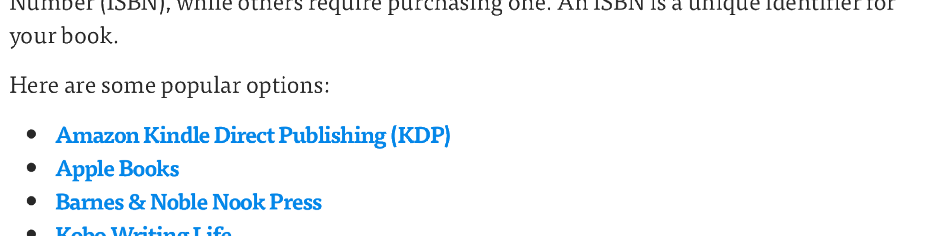
You or your client may create an attractive PDF e-book from your manuscript to use as a lead magnet. The e-book can be distributed directly to readers on your website and other social media platforms.

You can use any word-processing software to do this, though your finished product will look more polished using desktop publishing software, such as ~~Adobe Creative Suite~~, Canva, QuarkXPress, and ~~others~~. You may also opt to hire a graphic designer if designing is not in your wheelhouse.

Website visitors can download the publication for free or for a fee, at your discretion. If charging for the e-book, you will need an e-commerce setup on your platforms to process payments.

Here's an example illustrating how much more appealing getting a valuable product is to a visitor in return for their email address, as opposed to simply being asked to subscribe to a list:





Option 2: Self-Publishing Platforms

You can opt for broader exposure through self-publishing on platforms that provide free publishing services. These platforms often offer pre-formatted e-book templates, many of which offer free tiers. These templates, customizable to incorporate your client's branding, make life much easier for those untrained in graphic design. Simply search for "e-book templates" to discover an avalanche of possibilities.

You can upload your manuscript, set your pricing, and retain a portion of the royalties without incurring upfront costs. Some platforms offer a free International Standard Book Number (ISBN), while others require purchasing one. An ISBN is a unique identifier for your book.

Here are some popular options:

- **Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP)**
- **Apple Books**
- **Barnes & Noble Nook Press**
- **Kobo Writing Life**
- **Smashwords**
- **Draft2Digital**
- **Lulu**
- ~~**BookBaby**~~
- **Everand** (formerly known as Scribd)
- **Google Play Books**

Compare the specific guidelines and requirements of the publishing platform you choose. Each has its own set of rules and procedures, so it's important to understand them to ensure you get what you want.

Once you settle on the platform, actually publishing an e-book involves several steps:

- **Create an account —** Sign up for an account on your chosen platform and follow the platform's registration process.
- **Set up your book —** This typically involves filling in forms to provide details such as the title, author name, description, and keywords.
- **Upload your manuscript —** Upload your finalized manuscript in the required format (e.g., DOC, PDF, EPUB). Each platform will have specific formatting guidelines.
- **Add book cover —** Upload the cover you created or commissioned for your e-book.
- **Set pricing and royalties —** Enter the amount you will charge for your e-book. (This too will require research on your part to determine what will perform well in the market.) Some platforms also allow you to choose royalty options.
- **Choose distribution channels —** Select the distribution channels where you want your e-book to be available. This may include specific countries or regions.
- **Review and publish —** Double-check the details you entered before you click the "publish" or "submit" button! Then voila, you have made your e-book available for sale.
- **Wait for approval —** Some platforms may require a review process before your e-book becomes available. If this is the case, review the timetable for when to expect an answer.
- **Monitor sales and reviews —** Keep track of your e-book sales and customer reviews. When you get a written review, be sure to respond. This feedback can be invaluable for future improvements.

Marketing and promotion

Whatever method you use to publish your e-book, give it some love and optimum visibility by using every appropriate channel to endorse it (social media, your website, email, SMS... to name a few).

You could invest in paid advertising, book reviews, or social media promotions. Even postcards with beautiful graphics sent by snail mail still make an impact! Adjust these steps to fit your list, needs, and resources.

Determining Your Fee

Deciding what to charge for writing an e-book depends on many factors, and pricing can vary widely. Here are some considerations to help you determine a fair and competitive rate:

Your Experience and Expertise

Your level of experience and expertise in the subject matter (or on long-form content overall) can influence your pricing. Experienced writers or those with specialized knowledge can command higher rates.

Project Scope

Longer and more technically complex e-books warrant a higher fee. In the discovery process, thoroughly discuss the client's requirements to understand the scope of the project before offering a price quote.

If you're providing additional services such as research, interviews, editing and formatting the e-book, designing the e-book cover, or managing the publication and distribution processes, be sure to factor in these services when determining your rate.

Ghostwriting

Ghostwriters (who write on behalf of someone else and are not credited publicly) often command higher rates because of the nature of the work (more time spent in the discovery process with the client and reported author) and the confidentiality involved.

Client Budget

Ask about the client's budget and financial constraints upfront. It's better to know right away if what they can afford will not result in a fair rate for your services.

Payment and market rates

There are several ways writers can charge for their services:

- **Per-word rates —** Range between 10 cents and $4 per word.
- **Flat fees —** Range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. American Writers & Artists Institute's 2023 Copywriting Pricing Guide quotes $2,000–$7,000.
- **Hourly rates —** Range of $25 to $150 or more per hour.
- **Royalties —** If your client is charging for an e-book that has the potential for large sales, you could consider asking for a small part of the royalties in exchange for a discount on your upfront rate.

These figures are approximations based on current market rates. Stay informed about industry standards and best practices in e-book writing services. Review rates that writers with comparable experience and skills are charging for similar projects, and have conversations with others in the industry.

Explore platforms like American Author House to gain insights into the fees charged by agencies for e-book writing. Also, visit sites like Amazon's Kindle Store bestsellers list to see how similar e-books in your genre or industry are performing and how they are priced.

Is the client charging for access to the e-book?

An important consideration is whether your client intends to charge readers for access to the e-book or offer it for free. If there's potential for income, this could help offset your fee, and provide you with increased negotiating leverage.

Negotiation and contracts

Be prepared but open-minded in the money talk with clients. Discuss expectations on both sides, and accept only a mutually agreeable rate.

Because pricing varies so significantly, clear communication with your client regarding expectations, deliverables, and payment terms is essential. A detailed proposal with a breakdown of costs can help both parties understand the terms. Be sure your agreement is documented in a contract *before* beginning work.

Ultimately you have to decide what you're willing to accept based on your relationship with your client.

Here's a handy-dandy chart to help you as you formulate a proposal or quote for an e-book prospect:

Project Details and Considerations	
Target Audience and Topic Research	Identify the target audience and topics they care about. Niche audiences may pay more for valuable information.
Market Research (Are you conducting it or is the client providing it?)	Analyze similar e-books, prices, and sales. Study market rates via websites, professionals in the industry, competitors, and store data. Your e-book's perceived value will also impact pricing.
Expertise and Experience	Evaluate your knowledge and experience for the subject matter as well as for e-book writing.
Time and Effort Estimates	Use research to estimate how much time the project may require and how much you are willing to accept per hour when formulating your estimate.
Length and Complexity	Longer and/or technically complex e-books warrant higher rates. (You should be paid for your knowledge or the research you must conduct to obtain it.)
Additional Services (Enhance e-book value by taking on more responsibilities)	Is the project scope growing with tasks outside of writing the manuscript, such as self-publishing, marketing, distribution, or other requests?
Client's budget and expectations	Are the client's budget and expectations aligned with your own? A less experienced writer could take a lower rate in exchange for honing a new skill, but be sure you can deliver a quality product and are satisfied with the compensation.

What About AI?

These days no conversation is complete without factoring in how AI may affect the

Dashboard Events Resources Courses Search...

That can feel daunting. I know I can't write an entire e-book in less time than it would take to type my name and address.

It's not fun to feel like you need to justify your worth should your client start comparing the high speed, low cost, and fantastical output of machines with your abilities and prices. If you find yourself in this position, here are a few questions you might ask them to consider:

- Does AI have emotional intelligence?
- Can AI conduct interviews with someone not widely documented in existing media, and respond to their answers the way your unique mind would?
- Can AI express empathy, coax affection or truth, or even relate to humans in a way that would compel them to share deep, unexpected details that make a piece of writing soar?
- Does AI know your target audience better than you do?
- Can AI perfectly insert your personality into the e-book and tell your stories in a way that makes you feel proud?
- Can AI understand your authentic voice, and glean the same inferences and messages from your lived experiences?

I'm betting no. Not quite. Not yet. AI is a powerful tool for writers to use with discretion and skill, especially for things like research. But the quality of the content AI creates isn't amazing from the perspective of offering something fresh and new. *Remember, AI pulls from what is already out there.* I'm not as motivated to read things created by microchips.

Breathe!

This e-book thing may seem like a *lot*, but it's very doable. Consider an e-book as long-form copy in a different format. Offer up something people haven't read before and would be interested in learning, and share your (or your client's) unique insights. If you write with personality, enthusiasm, and knowledge about a topic that benefits your target audience, you'll do just fine.