

Frequently Asked Questions

The first questions I was asked as an author:

1. What's your total word count?

This was the first question I was ever asked as an aspiring author. At the time I was unaware that books are tracked entirely by word count. Pages, number of chapters, and every other measurement people tend to use in book size is a variable and subject to change depending on formatting. Word count is the only value which is static. It will never change and therefore is the only basis by which a book can be measured.

2. How many POV characters do you have?

I was able to answer this question but there's more to it than I initially realized. It takes roughly 30k words for a reader to fully bond with any character. The math alone correlates to the previous question. For instance, if a book has 3 main characters the total length needs to be 90k words without any setting details or non character driven plot. Having too many POV characters can be dangerous especially if you're trying to write a shorter book.

3. Is your story a Series or Standalone?

On the surface this is a pretty basic question, but having some experience I now know the importance of it. New writers need to stay away from writing series. The reason being is because they do not yet have the experience to craft flowing series. Moreover, the very nature of what we do means our newest book is always going to be better than the last. Using that logic, it's easy to see that a fifth book is going to be drastically better than a first. But if the first book sucks, as all too often they do, nobody is going to make it to the fifth because they can't get through the first. For this reason alone new writers are better suited to standalones until they've found their voice and learned to blend stories across multiple books.

Other questions I've been asked:

Advice

1. How long were you a part-time writer before you became a full-time one?

The part-time/full-time status has done nothing but add stress to my life. Even when I viewed myself as a part-time author, I've always worked as if I were full-time. What this question actually means is do you make enough money from your writing to not require another job? The answer to that is no. Most authors don't. Sadly it has nothing to do with how much time they put into their career, or how many books they've written, or even how good their books are. A book written in gold that grants the reader their deepest desire will remain unread unless the marketing is doing its job and getting it in front of people. For that, I've always been a full-time author with part-time benefits.

2. Have you read anything that made you think differently about fiction?

Every book I've ever read has changed some part of my thought process. Since becoming an author I've started seeing other books in pieces, breaking down their various parts and understanding how the story unfolds to create the story as a whole. Whether I enjoy a book or not I'm always able to further develop my own style, strengthening relatable aspects and dismissing features I don't like.

3. If you didn't write, what would you do for work?

I'm a craftsman. I love building stuff. It doesn't matter to me if it's a book, a motorcycle, swords or armor, or something else entirely. I'm a fast learner and I don't like working for other people. If I didn't write stories, which I typically didn't prior to 2009, I would simply have spent my time learning to further advance one of my many other skills. Though I've a feeling writing would still have come around one way or another. Too many tales have come out of my head for it to have never happened.

4. Do you read your book reviews? How do you deal with bad or good ones?

Many authors advise against reading reviews. But many authors struggle with crushing self doubt. I am not one of them. I have never doubted my ability. I know what I'm capable of and will always do everything within my power to achieve my goals. So, yes, I read my reviews when I discover them. I however do not engage with them. It's not my place to. The review section is not for me. It's a place for readers to engage with each other. If I were to step in and respond to reviews, good or bad, I would be robbing my readers of their ability to express themselves openly.

That said, I have felt emotion from various reviews. Sometimes I've been angry and sometimes I've been hurt. The trick is to realize you can't please everyone. Some people are hateful for the sake of being hateful. I still got their money. That alone is worth their bile.

5. Have you ever Googled yourself?

I'd be lying if I said no. I think this is something most people in the entertainment industry do. When I began in this industry I had to go all the way to page 3 before I found anything about myself. Now pretty much every link on those first three pages is pertaining to me. I've also found additional publicity about my work which I knew nothing about this way. It's always nice when others have taken the time to recommend my work, and I always try to thank them when that happens.

6. What one thing would you give up to become a better writer?

You mean more than I already have? Being a writer is a lonely job. Much of what we do is performed alone. We sacrifice holidays and time with our loved ones to get in a few more words. This can be taxing to not only ourselves but the people in our lives as well. Sometimes those close to us feel like we're ignoring them when the reality is we're trying to build something most people will never attempt.

I want to be the best writer I can be. And the only way to achieve that is by writing more. Studying more. And spending what time I have developing my craft. I don't know what more I can give that I haven't already given.

7. What is the most difficult part of your artistic process?

I struggle opening the window into my life. This is one of the reasons I find it difficult to use social media. When I put myself out there, I rarely see return on investment. This has left me relying less and less on social platforms. Unfortunately, it has also affected my reach. I try to put my efforts into the aspects that I can use for years to come rather than those which I have no control over and aren't working for me.

The craft side I find the easiest. I wish all I had to do was write books. But without the marketing, my work cannot be found by readers.

8. Does your family support your career as a writer?

Short form, yes. I was fortunate to have my mom. She's always supported me regardless of the endeavor I was pursuing. The support from much of my family feels stronger now than it did in the past, but often it feels more like an out of sight out of mind issue. It's easy to feel forgotten about, especially when you need people to make your goals a reality.

9. What is your writing process like?

My process has changed over the years. What worked for one book doesn't always work for the next. Currently, I've found writing a loose outline of the story keeps me on track. I typically begin with the story concept, containing a few key elements and the end. From there I work backward to find the beginning. Once the beginning, middle, and end details are established, I add filler details until my outline is complete.

I then spend every available moment I have pounding out the keys until my story is fully written. This takes me around a month for a 100k word novel. On average I write 1-3 chapters a day, each chapter falling between 3-5k words.

Once the story is complete I perform three editing passes myself, using different techniques for each pass. It then gets sent out my editors. While the manuscript is away I begin work on the cover and other marketing aspects in preparation for the launch.

Once the edited manuscript has returned, I do a final pass myself where I format the book and put the final product together.

10. What advice do you have for writers?

Stay away from writing a series until you've gained some experience. Many of the mistakes I've made throughout my career were made out of ignorance. You can't fix something you don't know is broken, and you won't know it's broken until you've learned otherwise.

11. What are common traps for aspiring writers?

Self doubt – Despite what your head is telling you, you can do this.

Blindly following advice - Advice is great when given properly. The trouble is most don't know how to give good advice. They give advice on how they would do it. That doesn't always work for your story. You have to learn when to take advice and when to ignore it.

Vanity presses – Vanity presses are just a bad idea. You gain nothing from them you can't easily do yourself. Moreover, they charge you for the same things you can easily do yourself. And lastly, they retain the rights to your work, barring you from easily escaping their grasp.

12. What is your writing Kryptonite?

Vocal noise. When people are speaking, I try to listen to them, even if it's someone on TV or the radio. My writing playlist is entirely instrumental. External voices interrupt the internal ones which I use to craft a story.

13. If you could tell your younger writing self anything, what would it be?

Start earlier. Get through the learning curve as fast as possible. Learn why things are done a specific way. You can break the rules if you know why they exist. Breaking them out of ignorance is a recipe for failure.

14. How did publishing your first book change your process of writing?

My first book was not published. At least not originally in its initial writing. My first published book was a contract job which taught me quite a bit about the industry. It was only a short time later that I started learning how the publishing side of the industry works. A few years after that I started my own publishing company.

15. What does literary success look like to you?

This is a question I've struggled with for longer than I care to admit. I'm just now coming to terms with how I define success. I've found that success is a moving goal post. I set goals and often reach them. The trouble comes in the fact that I often forget my previous successes. I picture it as climbing a series

of steps. Each step is an achievement, but I forget to look behind me to see how far I've come, instead focusing solely on the next step. Always the next step in a never ending staircase. Measured from where I began, I have already achieved success. Measuring from my current step, success is reaching a five figure income from my published works. After that, I wish to have at least one book published with Tor.

Craft

1. How long do you spend researching before beginning a book?

The type and amount of research done varies book to book. My most recent book, [The 95th District](#) required a ton of research. It felt like every page I was having to stop what I was doing and research something else. Other books I've written, such as my [Heroes of Order trilogy](#) didn't require much research at all. That's the difference between writing an entirely made up world and one set in the real world.

It really depends on the type of story you're writing. Even the most fantastical stories require believable laws for the reader to engage. If the reader cannot believe what you're saying, they'll constantly be thrown out of the story you're trying to tell.

2. What's the most difficult thing about writing characters from the opposite sex?

I believe other male authors struggle with this more than I have. All too often male authors tend to write female characters from the perspective of a male. The reality is character gender should be irrelevant. I believe each character should be initially written and developed without gender. Once you have a full and believable character, then you can assign their gender through the way they view and approach the world. By doing this I'm able to avoid the stereotypes male authors are all too often accused of applying to female characters.

3. How many hours a day do you write?

This varies. Most authors recommend writing at minimum two hours a day. It's believed this is the minimum length of time to maintain skill. I try to adhere to this but my personal life doesn't always allow it. Instead, my daily writing time is dependent upon my current project. If I'm actively working on a book, I spend every moment I can writing. It falls anywhere between 30 minutes and 16 hours a day, dependent on how demanding my personal responsibilities are that day. Being a single father and the primary caretaker for my grandfather, some days are more productive than others. An example from the last book I wrote, I had 16 interruptions before I was able to finish a single paragraph. It was at that moment when I knew I was not going to be able to write while they were awake. I then changed my writing time and finished the novel by writing every night between 11pm and 4am. When I'm not actively writing a book, I spend every waking moment working on the various other aspects of my company. Constant distractions don't seem to be as much of an issue when I'm not narrating internally.

4. Do you hide any secrets in your books that only a few people will find?

I enjoy puns. I don't think I've had a single book where I didn't hide at least one joke. As far as hiding larger meanings, I don't typically aim for that. It's my goal to tell an enjoyable story. I'm not out to spread my beliefs to others.

5. Do you believe in writer's block?

No! Writer's block is a term used by undisciplined writers. People who rely on motivation to write have not trained themselves to be professionals. A professional writer must write when it's time to

write. You cannot rely on motivation to always be there. As for hitting a snag where you aren't sure how to proceed, that is more of a story problem. A mistake made within the last chapter. When I encounter those types of issues, I simply delete the previous few paragraphs and start again from a place where I knew where the story was going. Every single time, I've made a subtle change which allowed me continue past my roadblock.

6. What's the Difference Between Scenes and Chapters?

A scene is a single, linear section of the story, usually told from the view of a single character. A chapter can contain many scenes, or be a single scene depending on length. Think of it like a television show. A scene is small chunk following a specific character. A chapter is the full episode. The entire book is the complete season.

7. Should I Edit as I Go?

In general, no. It's more important to get the words out and on the page (or screen) first. You can edit something in front of you. You can't edit something that isn't written.

8. Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Backstory?

Yes. In general, you do not want to include anything that does not drive the story forward. Backstory, flashbacks, and dream sequences rarely drive the story. You especially don't want to drop large sections of backstory. This is what we call info dumps. Avoid it like the plague. If you feel backstory is important to the plot, you need to sprinkle bits and pieces throughout then ovel through use of dialogue and character development. You should never dump backstory for the sake of dumping backstory. Your book will be better without it.

9. Should I Use Real-Life Settings or Made-Up Settings?

This is a personal call that each author must make for the story they're writing. A made-up setting is going to require more in the way of creative thought but require less research. The inverse is easier to make physically accurate but require much more research.

10. How do I write a novel?

One word at a time.

11. How long on average does it take you to write a book?

Most of the time I'm able to write a 100k word book in the course of 30 days. I then spend another 30 days getting it edited, while preparing the cover and other marketing data. The final 30 days is spent formatting and preparing for the launch.

12. What are some common writing mistakes?

Info dumping – dropping large chunks of information in narration rather than letting it trickle out during the story.

Head hopping – Jumping from the perspective of multiple characters in the same section. Don't do it. It confuses readers.

Inconsistent tense – Mixing past, present, and occasionally future tense. Pick one and stick to it.

Dialogue tags – Most of the time they aren't needed. If you need to identify which character is speaking, you likely haven't established their voice strong enough. You can also have them perform an action to serve the tag purpose.

Lack of setting – Inexperienced authors have a tendency to skim on description. This can leave a story feeling flat. I made this mistake with my first self-published novel. My editor pointed it out and I

ended up splitting the novel into two parts, growing both by more than 100 percent simply by strengthening the world details and descriptions.

Cross promotion/genre mixing – Probably the biggest mistake I ever made, and one I didn't know was a mistake until it was far too late to fix. Online marketing is algorithm based. Having written in multiple genres which were not compatible, some of my early books were misidentified and suffered because of it. Amazon in particular places all users into buyer archetypes. For example, if your supportive aunt is really into gardening and all of her Amazon purchases relate to gardening, and you write a book about space pirates. When she shows support and purchases your book, the algorithms think the book has something to do with gardening based on her archetype. They then start showing your book to other people who like gardening. And since it isn't a gardening book, nobody buys it. It happens again, this time with cookbooks. Again, no one buys. The algorithms aren't sure where your book belongs and eventually it stops trying to place it until it finally disappears into the dark recesses of all the books that never go anywhere.

Writing in multiple unrelated genres will have the same effect.

13. Is word count important? Is my novel too long/too short?

Word count should always be considered. Before starting any project, the author should research their intended genre to find the average book length.

On the flip side, it's really the author's choice. Paper books have become smaller due to the pace of modern society. Many people are intimidated by thicker books, and therefore less likely to purchase something that can't be finished in a timely manner. Then you have digital and audio formats which can be enjoyed with subscription based programs. Readers want these to be as long as possible so they get more bang for their buck.

I tend to write my stories with a specific word count in mind. This allows me to tailor what's going to happen a little easier. And when it comes to formatting for paper, there are a few tricks to augment the book's thickness.

14. Which is more important: character or plot?

There are three parts to any story. I believe their order of importance is Character, Plot, and then Setting. People need to relate to the characters. An amazing plot with shitty characters isn't a very enjoyable read. However, amazing characters with a shitty plot is manageable. Good characters and good plot with a shitty setting is still generally a decent story.

15. Should I follow publishing trends?

This is called writing to market. I believe it's important to know where the market stands. You have to remember, as a professional you're a business, not an artist. The goal is to make money.

On the flip side, you will typically have control over what you write. If everybody and their brother is writing vampire porn, do not feel obligated to do the same. Write what you want to write, but pay attention to the market so you can make an educated decision.

16. What do people mean when they say "show don't tell?"

This is a question many people, myself included, have struggled with at one time or another. The trouble is identifying the difference between the two. I started to understand the difference when I realized that telling is narration. Showing is when you describe through the character's eyes.

What most people who preach this rule don't tell you is there is a time and place for both. You want to immerse the reader by showing. This allows them enough detail to see what's happening, but it allows them to paint their own picture. By telling, or narrating, you're not only taking away from character development, but you're limiting what the reader is able to envision.

17. What does it mean to “raise the stakes”?

Simply put, reader investment. If the reader has bonded with the character and the character is placed in jeopardy, you’ve raised the stakes. It’s a way of increasing tension.

18. What is “pacing”?

The tone in which the story is told. Action scenes should be fast paced. Prison scenes should be slow paced. By changing the pace through choice of words and the details within the story you’re able to set the tone to further immerse the reader.

19. Should I write in first person or third person?

This depends entirely on the author and the genre they’ve chosen to write in. I would recommend researching your genre before making this decision.

20. Do I need a prologue? Should I get rid of my prologue?

Publishers don’t typically want prologues at this point in time. That trope was played out in the 80s. In reality, it depends on the story. Some stories need a prologue. Most do not. It comes down to what purpose the prologue is serving. If it’s a bunch of backstory to get the reader up to date before the story start, it’s likely a bad idea. Your probably info dumping and would be better served to sprinkle those details throughout the character development.

If your prologue serves to show the reader a future version of the character and the actual story is how the character gets to that point, the prologue is probably okay.

You also have situations where the character arc is slow starting so you need a prologue of a space battle and escaping droids set the mood and get your reader invested before they find themselves stranded in a boring Tatooine desert staring up at the dual sunset.

Publishing

1. How much does it cost to self-publish a book?

Depending on where you publish, it usually costs nothing. The only platform I’m aware of which charges to upload is Ingram Spark but there are ways around that as well.

The only costs occurred when creating a book come from hiring freelancers to perform various tasks. Cover artists, editors, formatting, etc. The price for these services vary person to person. While you do not have to use any of these to publish, it is strongly suggested you do so.

Considering it costs nothing to publish, paying a vanity press to publish your work is just silly.

2. Can I self-publish an audiobook? How does that work?

Yes. There are a few platforms available for this, though Audible is the most common. Surprise, it’s also an Amazon company. Pretty much all audiobook contract require a 7-year commitment. There are a few ways to make it happen, which I would recommend looking into. At this time I’ve not been able to find the right voice for my audiobooks, and therefore have not advanced beyond the initial stages for audio.

3. Should I submit to publishers directly?

Most of the time, no. This used to be less of an issue but in the late 80s and early 90s most publishers decided to only work with authors who were represented by a literary agent. It’s simply another layer of filtration to minimize the amount of slush the publishers have to sort through in order to find quality stories. Also, if you’ve sent out to publishers directly and an agent picks you up, you can damage that relationship if they discover you’ve already sent out.

The exception to this is if a publisher or editor asks you to submit a story. In that case, follow their directions.

You can always read a publisher's submissions directions. They will typically tell you if an agent is required or not.

4. How does the traditional publication process work?

I can only speak from my personal experience. I had the advantage that I made contacts in the industry early on. My traditionally published works came in the form of contract jobs. I would submit the outline for review. It would be discussed and altered to meet the publisher's desires. I would then be provided with a set amount of time to produce the completed manuscript. Once I'd written and done my editorial passes, I would send the manuscript to the publisher. We'd have several back and forth exchanges where I was fixing certain elements from the editor. Once the manuscript was ready, I would send it off and not see it again until the finished book was published. I then market it myself as most publishers don't participate in advanced marketing strategies outside of book signing opportunities and convention appearances. From there, I receive an annual royalty check for all copies sold. I'm also able to purchase copies to sale myself.

5. How does self-publishing work?

In its simplest form, anybody can self-publish. That is the largest hurdle those of us in the self-publishing arena face. For the longest time a stigma has surrounded the concept that self-publishing, or indie publishing isn't valid. The fact that anyone can do it has fueled that stigma. There are no gatekeepers. No quality control agents. And no content regulators to keep the bad stuff out, while allowing the good stuff the pass.

Fortunately, enough good authors have self-published and made successful careers that the stigma has lessened drastically, but it hasn't stopped the continual flow of low quality work being published every single day. That's why marketing is so important. You have to find a way to differentiate yourself from the muck.

The actual process of self-publishing is dependent on the author. You must first choose a platform. To my knowledge, Amazon KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing) is the only one which offers incentive for exclusivity. Once a platform, or multiple platforms, have been selected, you create an account. This requires legal identity as well as tax information. From there you create the title, uploading the manuscript and cover images, along with all the marketing data you've prepared; summary, keywords, genre, etc. Once all details have been plugged in and price points set, you submit the book for review. This can take up to 3 days where they basically just review the product and make sure it meets their perimeters. This is not typically a content review unless it was listed as a children's book and turns out to be erotica. Once the review has completed and the platform finds no major issues, you'll be given the option to review the final product before accepting or declining it.

Creating a paperback is much the same as the digital process listed above. In either case, the manuscript, cover art, and meta data need to be prepared and of professional quality before uploading.

6. What is hybrid publishing?

A hybrid published author is simply one who has been both traditionally published as well as indie or self-published. It's my opinion it is the best of both worlds. As a hybrid author myself, I was able to learn the ropes in a traditional setting, as well as gain the contacts the traditional side offers before going to the indie side. This has afforded me the benefits of both.

Marketing

1. What's the best way to market your books?

There is no correct answer to this question. There are no silver bullets. What works for one may not work for another. There are many factors that attribute to marketing success. The most important being the size of your following. If there's anything I've learned in this endeavor, you cannot succeed alone. Believe me I've tried. It takes numerous people purchasing, reviewing, and sharing your books to reach an even larger audience. Marketing is simply the lights and sirens you apply to your work in order to be seen through the fog.

2. How do I choose a book title?

Very carefully. The title's job is to tell a story and hook potential readers. If it fails in either regard, it's not working for you. Often times the title is all a potential reader will see. If it fails to get their attention they'll scroll past until another book succeeds at the task. Only after the title has caught their interest will they look at the next most important marketing tool, the cover.

3. How do I choose a cover?

Your cover should tell a story that hooks the reader and therefore makes it one of the most important decisions you can make for your book. It can, and often does, mean the difference between success and failure.

I would recommend studying the top 40 or so book covers in your genre. If you look at them all side by side you'll notice similarities between them all. I like to make a list of at least 10 elements that are the same and use it as a template for what my cover must have.

4. How should I decide my price point?

This is another question which is best served by researching similar books in your genre. If your 50k word urban fantasy (digital format) is priced at \$4.99 and all the other 50k word urban fantasies are \$2.99, you aren't going to get much attention.

On the other hand, provided you're Amazon exclusive and participating in Kindle Unlimited, that \$4.99 price point could be more incentive for KU subscribers to grab your book rather than one in the sea of books at \$2.99. Really, it just depends on your strategy. You could sell one book at \$9.99 and make \$7.00 profit, or 21 books at \$.99 to make the same. There is no right or wrong answer. You must simply find what works best for you.

5. Can I write books in more than one genre?

You can but I would advise against doing so, especially if the genres are unrelated. It's nothing to jump between urban and epic fantasy. They're closely related. You can even jump between sci-fi and fantasy. But it's more difficult to jump between conflicting genres. Readers tend to follow authors. If your religious expression audience is used to you writing only that, and suddenly your new book falls into paranormal erotica, you're going to have some disgruntled people leaving you bad reviews that will hurt your career.

If you plan to write in opposing or unrelated genres, you'd be better suited to use a pen name to avoid cross promotion which can damage not only your algorithms but your sales.