



So You Want to Write a Book

A Quick Start Guide to Choosing the Right Idea and Publishing Path

By J.B. Manas

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How to Use This Guide

You don't need a 300-page craft manual to decide whether you should write *your* book now, or how to publish it.

This quick guide is designed to help you:

- Decide whether you want to **write a book** or **become an author** (*they're not the same thing*)
- Stress-test your current idea before you sink months into it
- Choose a publishing lane that fits your goals and constraints right now

Give yourself about an hour to read and jot notes. By the end, you'll know whether your book idea belongs on your "yes," "not yet," or "never" list—and what to do next if it's a yes.

You might want a notebook or document open as you go; there are a few short reflection prompts along the way.

1. Do You Want to Write a Book or Be an Author?

The first decision isn't about genre or word count. It's about your **goal**.

There's a difference between wanting to **write a book** and wanting to **be an author**.

- If you mainly want to get one specific book into the world—say, a memoir, a business book, or a legacy project—you'll make different choices than someone who wants a long-term author career.
- If you want to be an author, you're signing up to learn the craft, understand the business, and likely write multiple books over time.

If you mostly want this one book to exist, you might:

- Accept a more expensive or less scalable publishing option to save time
- Care more about speed and impact than about building an audience over multiple titles

If you want to be an author, you'll probably:

- Invest more in craft, structure, and genre mastery
- Care about long-term positioning, platform, and reader expectations
- Think in terms of a body of work, not a one-off

Quick reflection

Which feels more like you *right now*?

- "I want to get this one book into the world, mainly for this topic or story."
- "I want to build an ongoing life as an author."

Jot a few sentences about why. There's no wrong answer. But being honest about it will keep you from chasing someone else's version of success.

2. Is This Idea Worth Pursuing Right Now?

Having ideas is easy. Choosing one that can actually sustain a book—and your energy—is harder.

Here are five quick filters drawn from the full *So You Want to Be an Author* guide.

1. Genre clarity

Can you easily answer, “Where would this sit in a bookstore or on Amazon?”

If you can’t imagine the shelf or category—thriller, cozy mystery, upmarket book club fiction, leadership, parenting, etc.—it will be harder for readers, agents, and retailers to understand and position the book.

Ask: *If I walked into a bookstore, which section would I want this on? Which books would I want it shelved beside?*

2. Strong comps

Can you name 2–5 recent books that are similar in feel or audience?

- For fiction, think in terms of tone, stakes, pacing, and tropes.
- For nonfiction, think in terms of topic, audience, and promise.

If you truly can’t find any comps (i.e., comparative titles), your idea might be too fuzzy or too niche. That’s not always bad, but it’s a warning flag.

3. Tropes and expectations

Every genre makes an emotional promise. Readers bring expectations whether you like it or not.

- Cozies: comfort, community, low on-page violence
- Thrillers: tension, danger, faster pace
- Romance: emotional yearning plus a satisfying HEA/HFN (Happily Ever After / Happy for Now)
- Literary/upmarket: interiority, language, ambiguity, theme
- Nonfiction: clear, practical takeaways—or inspiring stories—with ideas the reader can use right away

Ask: *What emotional promise am I making? What tropes are “green lights” for my readers, and what would feel like a cheat?*

4. Passion and staying power

Whatever idea you choose, you’ll be living with it for a while—through multiple drafts, feedback cycles, and the promotional tail.

Ask: *If I had to talk about this idea every week for the next two years, would I still be excited—or would I dread it?*

If it’s dread, this may not be the one.

5. Depth

Is there enough there for a full book?

For **fiction**, can you imagine:

- A clear beginning, middle, and end
- A protagonist who is genuinely changed, not just dragged through events

For **nonfiction**, can you list:

- 10–12 meaningful questions, problems, or themes your reader has about the topic—enough to become distinct chapters or sections?

If you run out after three, it might be better as an article, a talk, or a shorter guide.

Idea outcome

If your idea fails more than one or two of these tests, it may belong in your “idea garden” for later, not on your current desk. But don’t consider it a failure; it’s one more step on the way to success.

3. Who Are You Really Writing For?

You’re not writing for “everyone who likes good books.” You’re writing for **someone**.

A few quick passes at your reader can clarify a surprising amount.

Step 1: Sketch a simple reader profile

Finish this sentence in a few lines:

“My ideal reader is someone who...”

Consider:

- Their stage of life and pressures (early career, mid-career, nearing retirement, etc.)
- What they’re looking for emotionally: escape, comfort, catharsis, adrenaline, hope, belonging
- How much time and attention they typically have: short commute reads vs long, immersive sessions

You don’t need a three-page persona. A paragraph is enough to steer creative choices.

Step 2: Name the emotional contract

Different genres and categories make different promises.

- For fiction:

“By the end of this story, I want my reader to feel...”

- For nonfiction:

“After this book, I want my reader to be able to...”

Write one or two sentences. Keep them where you’ll see them when you draft and revise.

4. Traditional, Self-Publishing, or Hybrid?

You do **not** need to master every detail of publishing yet. At this stage, you just need a directional choice so you can aim your efforts.

Here’s the simplest overview, adapted from Part 3 of the full Starter Kit.

Traditional publishing

You sell the book to a publisher.

- You usually need an agent (especially for fiction and most nonfiction).
- The publisher pays for editing, design, printing, and basic distribution.
- You’re typically paid an advance, then royalties once it earns out.
- They have final say on title, cover, pricing, and timing—though you’re generally consulted.
- They handle core sales and distribution into bookstores and libraries, but authors are still expected to do a meaningful amount of their own platform building and marketing.

Good fit if: you value prestige, wider print distribution, and are willing to work within someone else’s timeline and creative framework.

Self-publishing

You are the publisher.

- You hire (or DIY) editing, cover, layout, and distribution.
- You keep a much larger share per sale, especially on ebooks, but there’s no advance.
- You control title, cover, price, formats, and release timing.
- You are fully responsible for your own marketing and advertising, and while online sales can be strong, self-published books are less likely to be stocked by national chains without focused effort.

Good fit if: you want maximum control and speed, are comfortable treating the book as a business asset, and like the idea of long-tail ownership.

Hybrid publishing

You share costs and control with a publisher.

- You pay a significant fee up front; they provide professional production and distribution under their imprint.
- Royalties are usually higher than traditional because you share risk.
- Legitimate hybrids are selective and aim to make money from book sales, not just author fees.

Good fit if: you want professional support and broad availability, and you’re willing to invest up front and

vet partners carefully.

A quick warning about vanity presses

If a company wants your money up front and can't clearly explain how they make money from selling books to readers (not just from authors), pause and research.

5. A Very Simple Decision Helper

You don't have to pick a path forever. You just need a lane to aim at **for your current project**.

Consider these “for now” statements and circle the one that feels closest:

- “I’m aiming at **traditional**, so I’ll focus on a strong manuscript/proposal, platform, and query strategy.”
 - “I’m leaning toward **self-publishing**, so I’ll start learning about editors, cover designers, and print/ebook platforms.”
 - “I might want a **hybrid** partner, so I’ll learn how to tell reputable hybrids from vanity presses before signing anything.”
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6. Your Next 7 Days

To avoid getting stuck in “learning mode,” here’s a very light 7-day plan, adapted from the 30-day plan in the full book.

You can shift days around. The point is momentum, not perfection.

Day 1–2: Choose “this one”

- Shortlist 2–3 ideas.
- Run them through the filters in Section 2 (genre clarity, comps, depth, passion).
- Pick one to focus on *first*.

Day 3: Draft a logline or hook

For **fiction**, try:

“When [inciting event] happens, a [specific protagonist] must [goal] before [stakes], even though [key obstacle or twist].”

For **nonfiction**, try:

“This book is for [audience] who struggle with [problem]. It shows them how to [outcome] by [your angle].”

Day 4: Define your reader

Write one short paragraph starting with “My ideal reader is someone who...” and note how you want them to feel or what you want them to be able to do after reading.

Day 5: Circle a publishing lane

Based on Section 4, circle:

- Traditional
- Self-publishing
- Hybrid / not sure yet (but leaning)

You can change your mind later. The goal is a working assumption.

Day 6–7: Tell a few real people

Don't just sit with the idea in your own head. Run your logline or hook by 3–5 people—ideally a mix of trusted friends and folks who resemble your target reader.

Share your one-sentence pitch and ask:

- “What about this grabs you?”
- “What, if anything, feels vague or confusing?”
- “If you saw this on a bookshelf or streaming menu, would you keep scrolling or click for more?”

Pay more attention to their **reactions** than their wording:

- Do their eyes light up?
- Do they start asking follow-up questions?
- Or do they just say “Nice” and change the subject?

If three or more people lean in and want to hear more, you're probably onto something hooky. If most people politely nod and move on, that's useful data—it may be time to sharpen the concept or choose a different idea to lead with.

Refine your one-sentence hook based on their reaction until you get a winner.

By the end of these seven days, you'll have:

- One chosen project
- A working logline or hook
- A sketched reader
- A provisional publishing lane
- One concrete week of progress under your belt

7. What the Full Starter Kit Includes

This quick guide covers the early crossroads: **why**, **which idea**, and **which lane**. If you'd like a full roadmap—from idea to action plan—with done-for-you templates, the *So You Want to Be an Author Starter Kit* goes much deeper.

Here's a look at what's inside:

Part 1: Decide What You Really Want

- Why another writing resource
- Who this e-book is for
- Why you want to write a book vs. be an author
- Defining success so you're not chasing someone else's dream

Part 2: Is Your Idea Worth Pursuing?

- Can anyone write a book (really)?
- The four traits great authors share
- Spotting a winning idea (and letting go of the others)
- Which genres sell best (and how much you should care)
- Who you're writing for, in more depth

Part 3: Choose Your Publishing Path

- Overview of traditional, self-publishing, hybrid—and what to avoid (vanity presses)
- Realistic cost ranges and money flows
- The ghostwriter option
- Whether you need a pen name
- Submission paths for fiction vs. nonfiction

Part 4: Build a Simple Plan

- The five ingredients of writing a book (planning, research, writing, rewriting, marketing)
- From premise to logline (for fiction) and hook (for nonfiction)
- Quick-start outlining options for plotters and pantsers
- Platform basics (email, simple site, one main social channel)
- Building your author community so you're not doing this alone
- Promotion basics: how readers hear about your book

Part 5: Your Next Steps

- Common early mistakes and how to avoid them
- A simple 30-day plan to move forward
- When to consider getting help (beta readers, editors, coaches, marketing)
- Recommended reading and resources

PLUS... you get a 24-page **Book Launch Roadmap** that outlines a six-month launch timeline for indie, traditional, and hybrid authors, including:

- Key actions for each phase, from 6 months before launch through 3 months after
- Integrated guidance for email, Instagram, ARCs, blurbs, preorders, and partnerships
- Notes on lead-time items like paid editorial reviews, ARC distribution, ads, and preorders
- A condensed launch checklist you can reuse for every book

Bonus: Printable Worksheets & Checklists

- Idea & Premise Filter Worksheet
- Logline (Fiction) & Hook (Nonfiction) Worksheet

- 30-Day Starter Plan Checklist
- Reader Profile & Emotional Promise Worksheet
- Beta Readers & Editing Prep Checklist

If you want the full roadmap:

You can get the complete *So You Want to Be an Author Starter Kit* (ebook + Book Launch Roadmap + bonus templates) for \$27 at jbmanas.com/for-authors.

8. If You Need 1:1 Help

This guide and the Starter Kit are designed to help you make smarter decisions on your own. But sometimes it's faster and less stressful to talk things through with someone who's been there.

If you'd like more personalized help, there are a few ways we can work together:

- **Idea to Publishing Strategy Session** — A 75–90 minute 1:1 deep dive on your book idea and goals. We'll clarify your premise, define your ideal reader, choose a publishing path that fits your timeline and risk tolerance, and sketch a rough table of contents or story framework with clear next steps.
- **Pitch & Plot Analysis** — For writers ready to query agents or launch an indie book. You'll get a detailed review of your query letter, one-page synopsis, and first 10 pages, plus a 60-minute strategy call to sharpen your hook, fix pacing leaks, and align your opening with your genre and market.
- **Story Blueprint Intensive** — A 6–8 week, collaborative 1:1 engagement to design a story blueprint tailored to your process—from a high-level spine for discovery writers to a chapter-by-chapter outline if you prefer more structure.

If you're interested in any of these, you can find details and current availability at: jbmanas.com/for-authors

9. Stay in the Loop

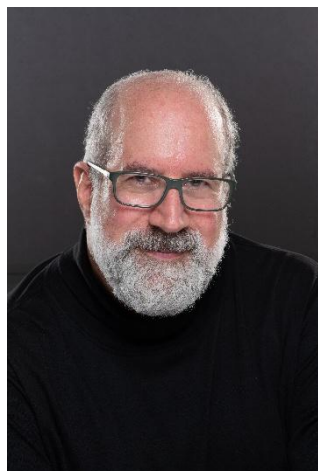
If you'd like to:

- Hear when new follow-up guides and courses are available
- Get weekly behind-the-scenes posts on the author life
- See more breakdowns of story structure, publishing paths, and query strategy

You can subscribe to my Substack newsletter, **This Writer's Life** by J.B. Manas, where subscribers also get bonus resources and early updates.

You can also reach me directly at: [jb \(at\) jbmanas \(dot\) com](mailto:jb@jbmanas.com)

About the Author



J.B. Manas is an award-winning author of suspense and sci-fi thrillers, including *Dragon Island*, *The Mirror Man*, *The Kronos Interference* (co-author), and more. He's also written bestselling nonfiction on leadership and organizational life under his real name, Jerry Manas, and has worked with literary agents and major publishers on both fiction and nonfiction.

His work has earned starred reviews in *Kirkus* and multiple honors from BestThrillers.com, including Best Sci-Fi Thriller of 2022 for *The Mirror Man* and a 2025 finalist nod for *Dragon Island*. *The Mirror Man* was also a quarterfinalist in the BookLife Prize (sponsored by *Publishers Weekly*).

Manas is Editor-in-Chief of Good Alien, where he collaborates with top creators in comics and multimedia, and is a member of International Thriller Writers (ITW), Mystery Writers of America (MWA), the Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFIO), and the Authors Guild. He lives and writes in Bucks County, PA with his family and a mischievous mutt named Max.

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