Nonfiction Author Survey Results



Results from the summer 2020 survey

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Contents

Introduction 3
About the Respondents 4
Nonfiction Genres 4
Author Expertise 5
Reasons for Writing 8
Questions for Unpublished Writers 10
Current Book Status 10
Publishing Plans 11
Where People Get Stuck 12
Published Authors 13
Publication Path 13
Writing Process 14
Research 15
Goals and Expectations 17
Open-Ended Reactions and Advice 19
Biggest Surprise 19
Lessons Learned 20
Other Words of Wisdom 22
Summing Up 23

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, more than 400 nonfiction authors responded to my online survey about why and how they wrote and published their books.

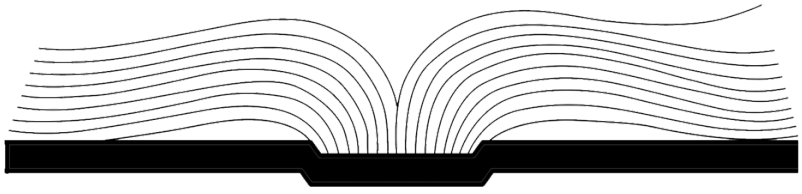
The data yielded several intriguing insights about the processes of writing and publishing nonfiction books. For example:

- Most authors start writing before they finish researching.
- Very few final drafts match to the initial outline exactly.
- Marketing is a big challenge for most authors.
- Publishers and publishing are a source of great confusion and uncertainty for many.
- No matter what their genre, most authors are motivated by the desire to serve others with the ideas and stories they share.

Most important, from my perspective, was the question about the motivation for writing. Most people, even business authors, are motivated by a desire to serve others with their ideas and world.

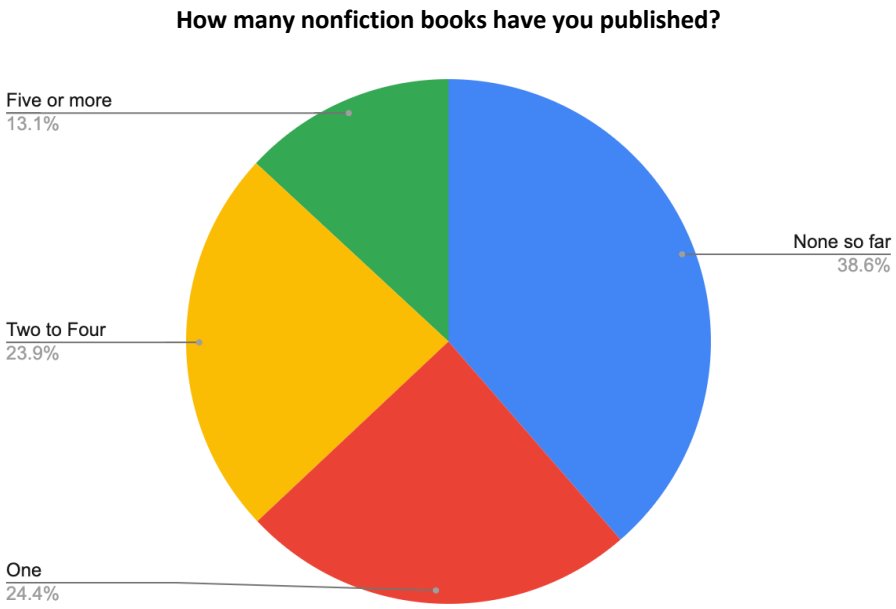
I hope that if *you* also want to serve others with your writing, the insights from this survey may help you.

Anne Janzer



About the Respondents

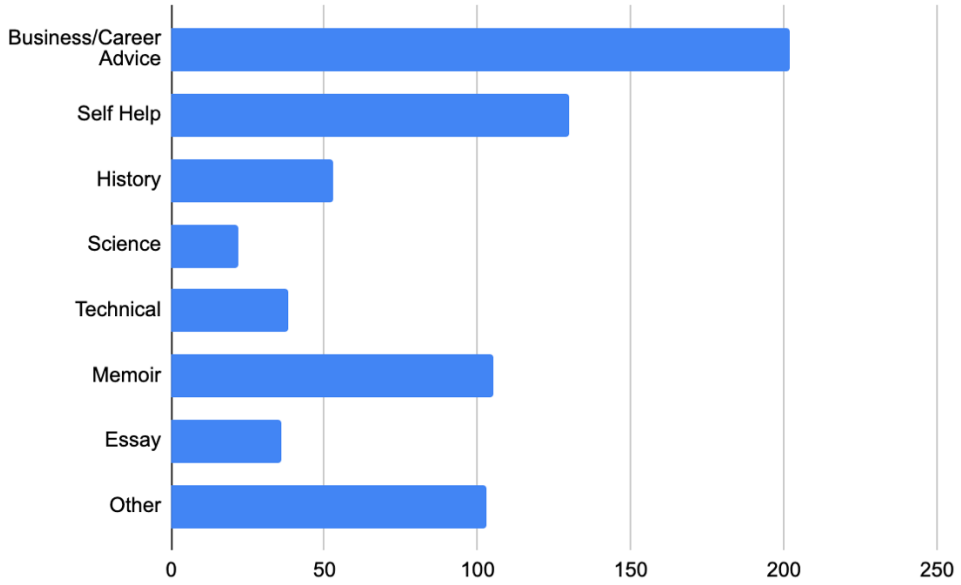
Of the 435 people who responded to the survey, 267 had published at least one book, and 168 were as-yet unpublished.



Nonfiction Genres

Of the respondents, the most popular nonfiction genres included business/career advice, self-help, and memoir.

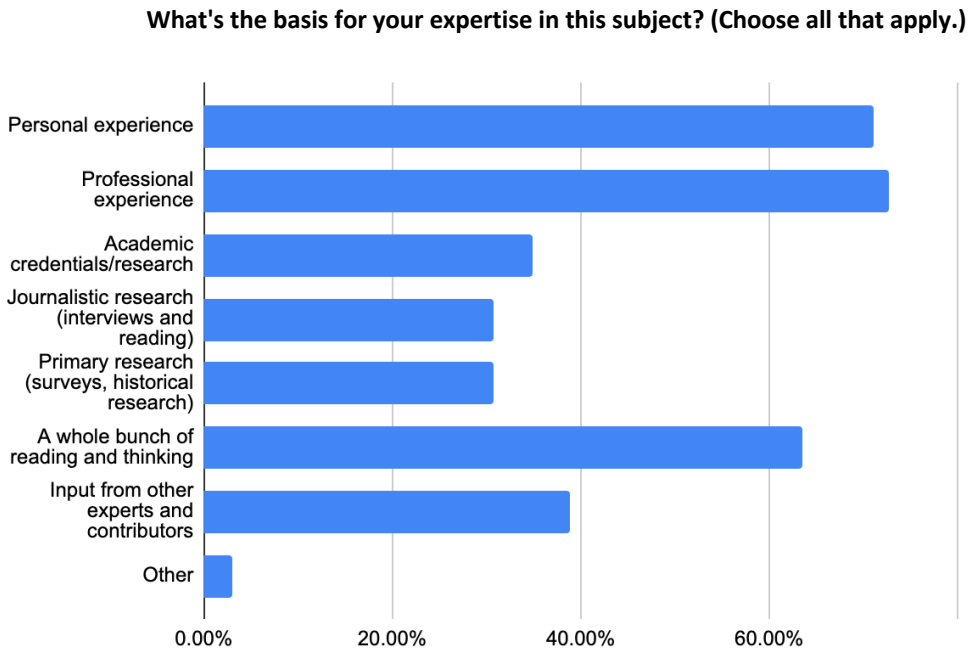
What kind of nonfiction books have you written, or do you hope to write? (Choose all that apply.)



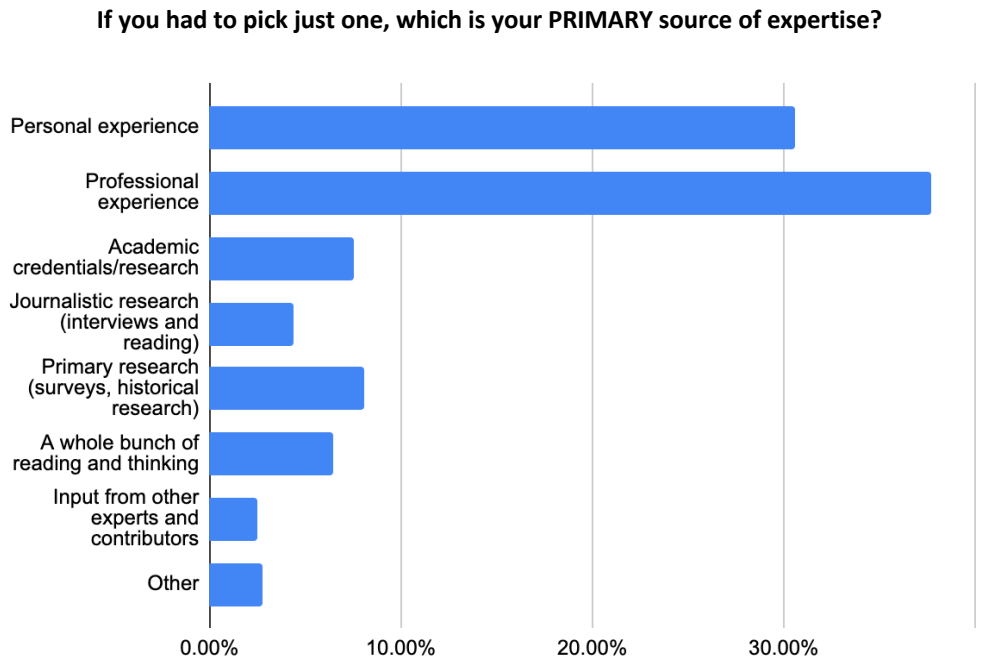
Many people chose more than one genre or had written more than one book in different categories. There were 689 responses total for 435 respondents, and 100 people chose "Other" and wrote something more specific.

Author Expertise

The survey asked people about their sources of expertise. Respondents answered twice: once selecting all of the sources that applied, and once choosing a primary source.



When listing *all* of their sources, the big winners are personal and professional experience, combined with reading and thinking. Yet many of the authors supplement experience with journalistic research, academic and primary research, and more. Most authors look write from experience but deepen their expertise through research.



Insight: Most of us write nonfiction grounded in either personal and professional experience. But we also flesh out that experience with other sources, including primary and journalistic research, input from others, and a whole bunch of reading and thinking.

Reasons for Writing

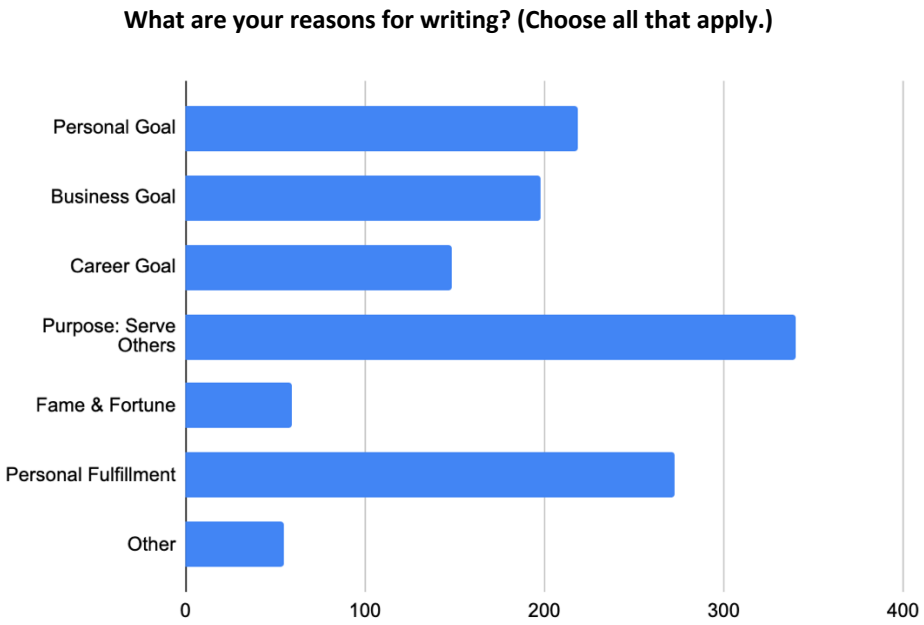
What motivates us to write books? The survey asked this question of *all* authors, published and not.

First, people selected *all* of their reasons from a pre-defined list. Then they had to choose one primary reason. (Ideally, the first prompt encouraged reflection.) Here's the list of possible answers:

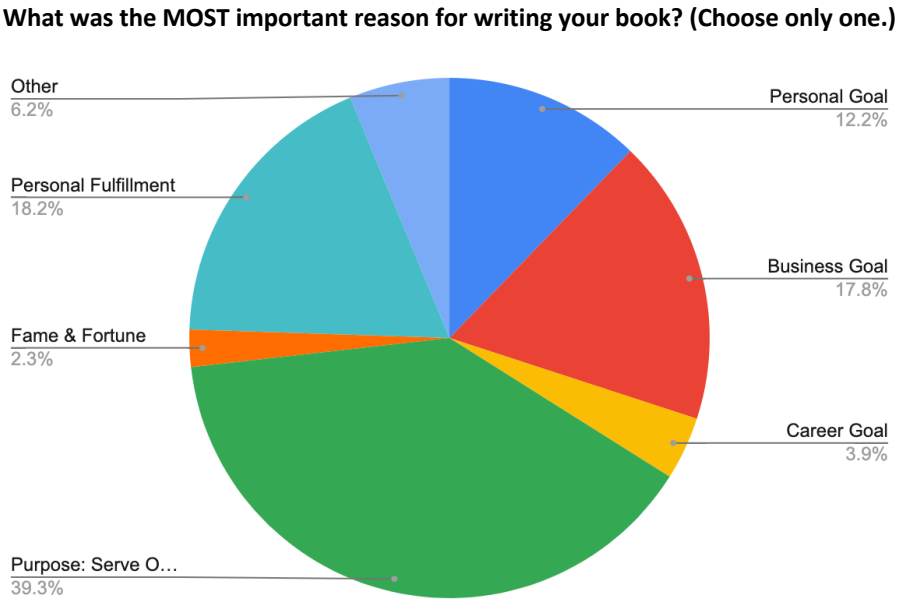


The clear winner in both categories was **Purpose: I want to serve others…**

When people could choose *all* of their reasons, nearly 80 percent of the respondents chose the Purpose option.



When identifying a single, primary motivation, *purpose* remained the clear leader, with nearly 40 percent of respondents. Next were personal fulfillment (18.2 percent), business goal (17.8 percent) and personal goal (12.2 percent).



Insight: Even though almost half of the respondents wrote business or career books, the business or career goal was often secondary to something else. An inner sense of purpose is a powerful motivator through the process of writing and publishing a book.

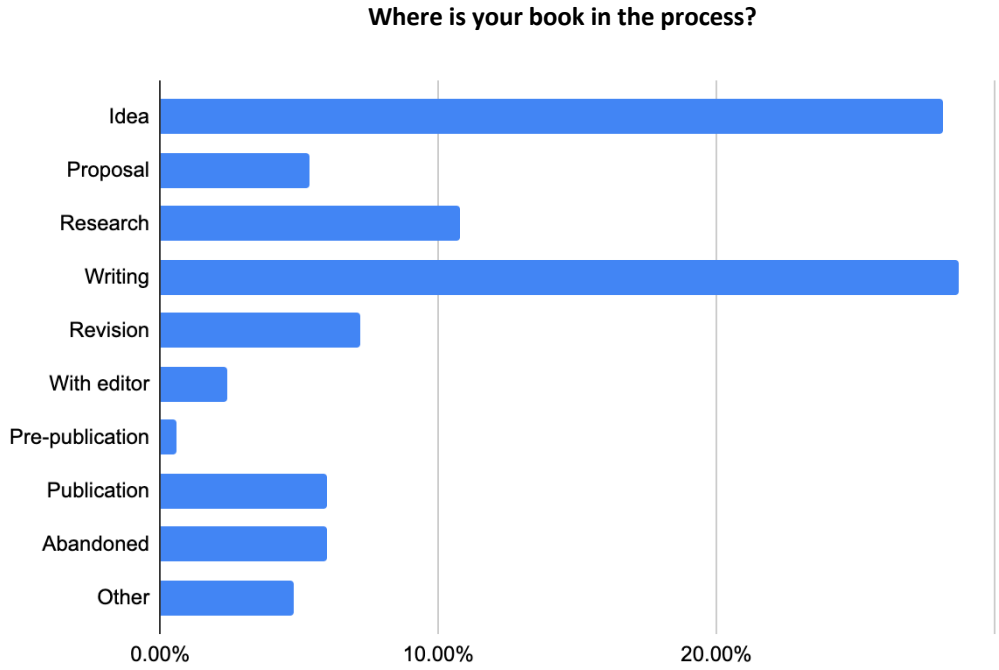
Questions for Unpublished Writers

Respondents who had not yet published a book answered questions about their plans and their current book status.

Current Book Status

For the unpublished authors:

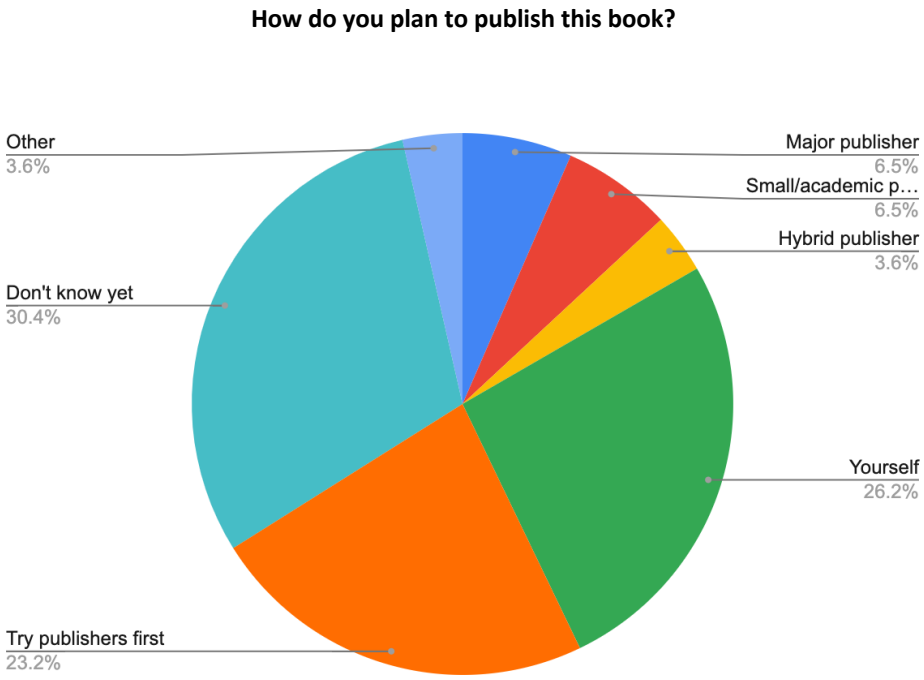
- 28 percent were in the "idea generation" phase
- 28 percent were actively writing the draft
- 10 percent were researching



The other responses were scattered among different phases, from writing the proposal to publishing. Some people had abandoned their projects altogether. (Again, there was a significant number of free-form "other" responses.)

Publishing Plans

Many unpublished authors are still uncertain about their publishing paths.

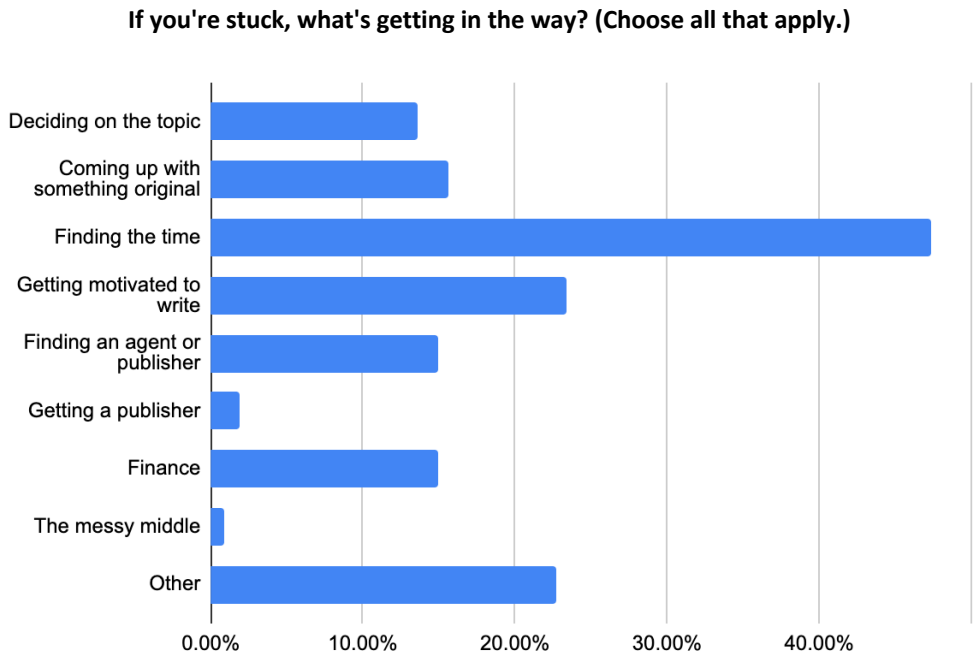


- The most popular answer (30 percent) was *I don't know yet*.
- About a quarter (26 percent) planned to publish themselves (indie authors)
- About 23% plan to start by pitching traditional publishers, then self-publish if that didn't work out.
- Traditional publishing accounts for only 13%, split evenly between major houses and small or academic presses.

Insights: People are trying to figure out their options in the rapidly changing publishing landscape.

Where People Get Stuck

Finding the time to write and getting motivated to write were two most common obstacles. (No surprise there.) But topic-related struggles afflicted several authors as well.



Not all of the unpublished authors answered this question, and people chose multiple answers, so the percentages add up to more than 100%. But it's fascinating to see where people struggle.

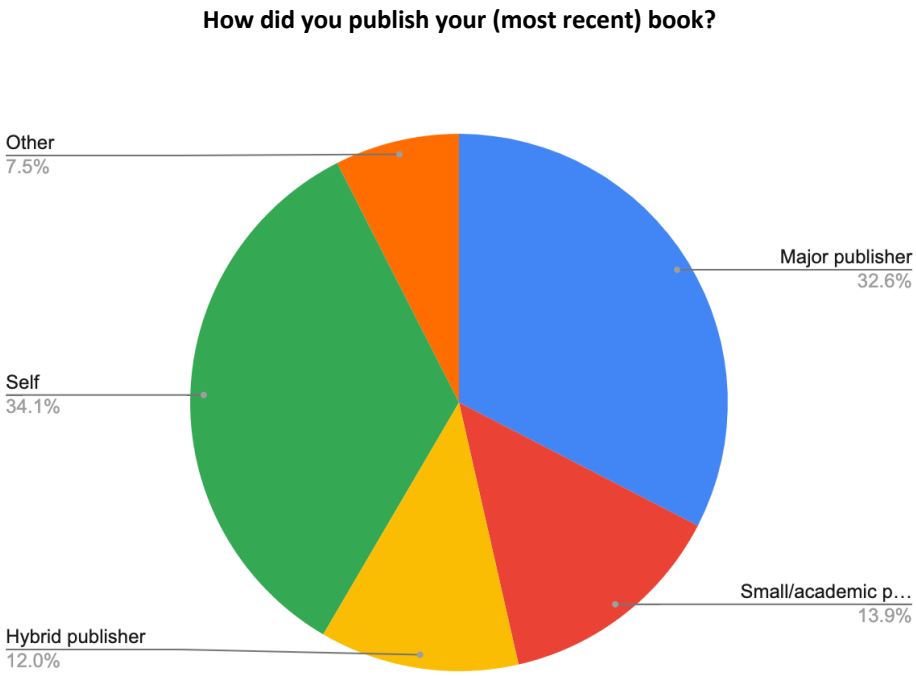
Published Authors

The published authors answered a large number of survey questions, and also shared many insights in free-form questions.

Publication Path

Nearly half of the published authors in the survey used a traditional publisher: 32 percent had a major publisher and 14 percent used a small or academic press.

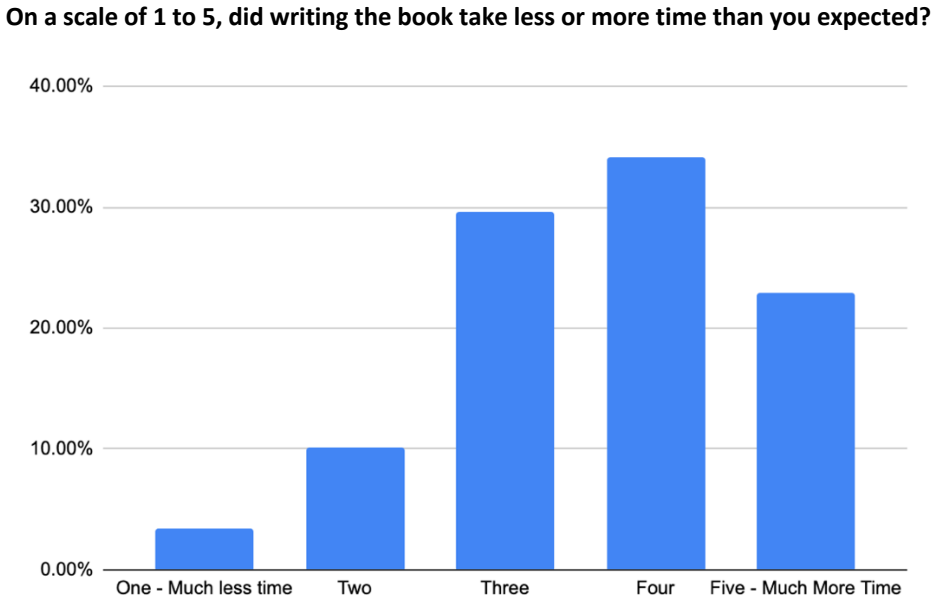
About a third were indie or self-published authors, and 12 percent reported using a hybrid press.



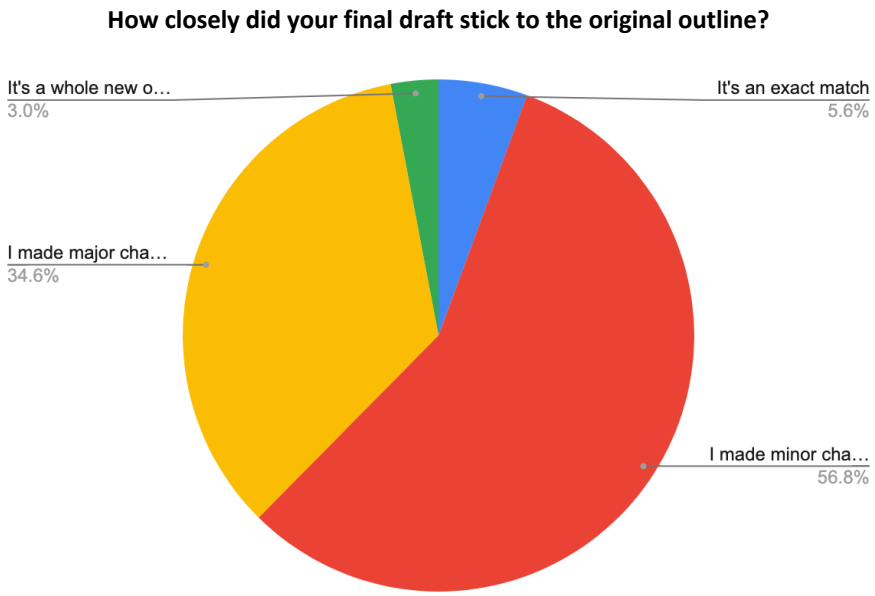
Insight: The world of publishing options is expanding. Hybrid publishing seems to be on the rise. In the comments, several authors reported being happy with their hybrid publishers, including authors who had previously used major publishers.

Writing Process

We asked the published authors about whether the book took longer than planned and whether the final result matched the initial outline. These answers offered fascinating insights into the universalities of the writing experience.



Insight: Writing a book almost always takes more time than you think it will, and we aren't good at estimating long-term projects!

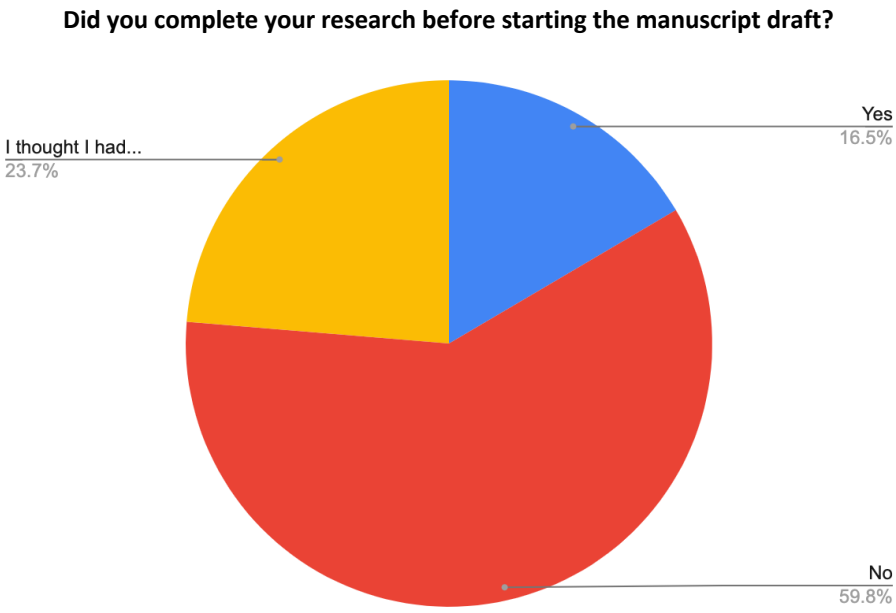


Less than 6 percent of the published authors ended up with a book that exactly matched their outline. Over half made minor changes, and well more than a third made major changes.

Insight: Most books outgrow their outlines during the writing process.

Research

About 60 percent of the surveyed authors start writing before they're "done" researching. Another 23.7 percent *thought* they had finished researching, only to discover that there was more to do.



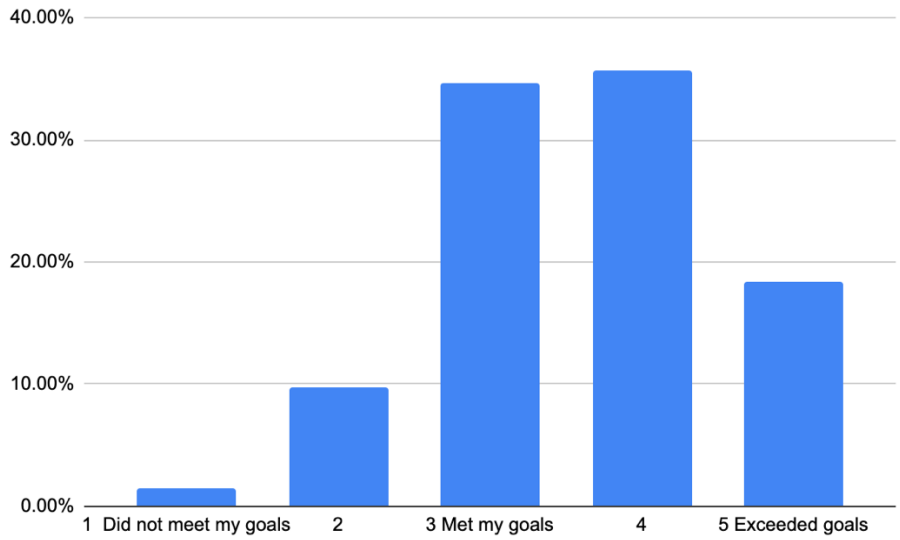
Insight: Waiting to "finish" your research before writing isn't a great idea. Writing often reveals new avenues for research.

Goals and Expectations

The first part of the survey asked all authors about their reasons for writing. This section asked the published authors how well the experience of publishing a book met their expectations—both personal and professional.

In both cases, publishing a book either met or exceeded most authors' objectives.

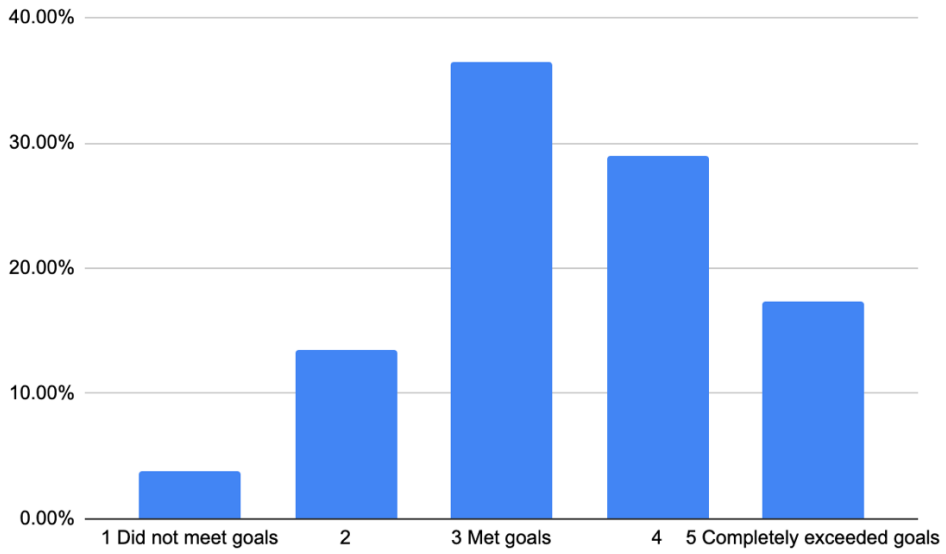
Personal goals: On a scale of 1 to 5, how has publication met your personal goals and expectations. (3 would be "met goals.")



The experience was positive, meeting or exceeding personal goals, for about 89 percent of the authors. Only about 11 percent of the authors were disappointed in their personal goals.

Because many business authors write for professional reasons, the survey included a question about business objectives.

Career/business goals: On a scale of 1 to 5, how has your published book met your career or business objectives?



Publishing a book met or exceeded business goals for 83 percent of the authors.

Open-Ended Reactions and Advice

Not all insight fits neatly into multiple-choice questions. The survey also asked the respondents open-ended questions about their greatest surprise, what they would do differently, and anything else they would like to share.

The responses were wonderful and varied.

Biggest Surprise

Asked about their biggest surprise, the responses were varied. But a couple key themes emerged: marketing and publishing.

What was the biggest surprise about publishing a book?



Publishing: About 14 percent expressed surprise about the publishing process or their publishers—sometimes disappointment in their chosen publisher, sometimes a pleasant surprise with a hybrid publisher.

Marketing: About 14 percent reported being surprised by the amount of marketing involved.

For many, the personal results were particularly fulfilling. In one of my favorite responses, someone was surprised by "*how much smarter people think you are because you're published.*"

A few were disappointed: *"It didn't completely change my life."*

Lessons Learned

Asked what they would do differently, the respondents offered a wide range of answers. But as you can tell from the word cloud, there are common trends.

What, if anything, would you do differently?



In sorting the responses into categories, three major themes emerged.

Marketing and promotion: More than a quarter of the "what I would do differently" comments had to do with marketing and promotion. People would allow more time for this, would start marketing the book earlier, would have a better marketing plan, and so on.

Publication: Another 15 percent would make a different publishing decision. Some self-published authors said they would use a traditional publisher, while several traditional authors said they would publish on their own or use a hybrid press next time. (The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence!)

Time: Several authors said they would give themselves more time for different parts of the process. And many reported that they would start writing sooner. One respondent said: *"I should have written it ten years before."*

Other Words of Wisdom

The last survey question asked for any other insights the authors wanted to share. Here are a few of the answers that might inspire you.

> *There is still magic in being a "published author." Now I realize that many of the rewards are internal.*
>
> *It's been fascinating and fulfilling.*
>
> *Publishing is a marathon, not a sprint — and it's a marathon with no finish line. Don't burn yourself out!*
>
> *Writing and publishing is tremendously satisfactory and time consuming, it stretches the brain to its limits, yet the result is like having a healthy newborn baby.*
>
> *Writing /publishing the book was very emotionally satisfying, which was unexpected.*
>
> *Everyone who wants to write, should. Just know that you have to fan your own flames a lot, and that finishing is a huge triumph.*

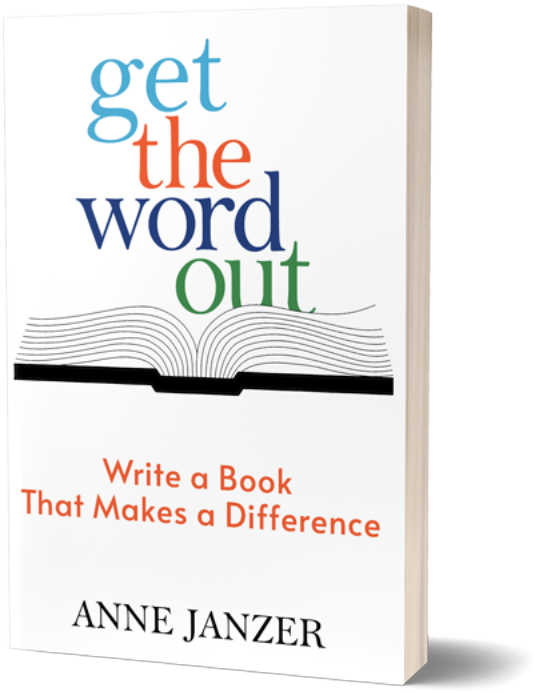
Summing Up

I hope you find this insight helpful—and many thanks to everyone who contributed to this survey!

Feel free to share this research with others; please attribute the research to Anne Janzer. You can also send people to a web page describing the highlights of the report here: AnneJanzer.com/nonfiction-authors.

If you have questions about this survey, please contact me at anne@annejanzer.com. To read more, I invite you to visit AnneJanzer.com and find my blog, books, online courses, and other resources.

Highlights from this research appear in my upcoming book *Get the Word Out: Write a Book that Makes a Difference*. If you found this data useful, you may enjoy that book. Find more information at AnneJanzer.com/get-the-word-out.



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