

Writing Your Novel Is The Easy Part

By Michael LaRocca

A free white paper from MichaelEdits.com

“Michael, are you crazy?”

Maybe. What about it?

Here’s everything I know about improving your writing, publishing it electronically and in print, and promoting it after the sale.

Two questions you should ask:

1. What will it cost me?
 2. What does this Michael LaRocca guy know about it?
- Answer #1 — It won’t cost you a thing. The single most important bit of advice I can give you, and I say it often, is don’t pay for publication.

**Never pay
to be
published.**

My successes have come from investing time. Some of it was well spent, but most of it was wasted. It costs me nothing to share what I’ve learned. It costs you nothing to read it except some of your time.

- Answer #2 — “Michael LaRocca has been researching the publishing field for over 10 years.”

This quote from Authors Wordsmith was a kind way of saying I’ve received hundreds of rejections. Also, my research required 20 years.

I’ll tell you what’s missing from this monologue. What to write about, where I get my ideas from, stuff like that. Maybe I think you should do it your way, not mine. Or maybe I don’t know how I do it. Or maybe both. Once you’ve done your writing, this paper should help you with the other stuff involved in being a writer. Writing involves wearing at least four different hats. Writer, editor, publication seeker, post-sale self-promoter.

Here’s what I can tell you about my writing.

Sometimes an idea just comes to me out of nowhere and refuses to leave me alone until I write about it. So, I do.

And, whenever I read a book that really moves me, I think, “I wish I could write like that.” So, I just keep trying. I’ll never write *the* best, but I’ll always write *my* best. And get better every time. That’s the “secret” of the writing “business,” same as any other business. Always deliver the goods.

Someone who doesn't enjoy reading will never write something that someone else will enjoy reading.

I read voraciously, a habit I recommend to any author who doesn't already have it. You'll subconsciously pick up on what does and doesn't work. Characterization, dialogue, pacing, plot, story, setting, description, etc. But more importantly, someone who doesn't enjoy reading will never write something that someone else will enjoy reading.

I don't write "for the market." I know I can't, so I just write for me and then try to find readers who like what I like. I'm not trying to whip up the next bestseller and get rich. Not that I'd complain. But I have to write what's in my heart, then find a market later. It makes marketing a challenge at times, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

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When you write, be a dreamer. Go nuts. Know you're writing pure unadulterated brilliance. That fire is why we write.

An author I greatly admire, Kurt Vonnegut, sweated out each individual sentence. He wrote it, rewrote it, and didn't leave it alone until it was perfect. Then he wrote the next sentence the same way, etc., and when he reached the end of the book, it was done.

I don't write like that. I let it fly as fast as my fingers can move across the paper or keyboard, rushing to capture my ideas before they get away. Later, I change and shuffle and slice.

James Michener writes his last sentence first, then has his goal before him as he writes his way to it.

Then there's me. No outline whatsoever. I create characters and conflict, spending weeks and months on that task, until the first chapter leaves me wondering "How will this end?" Then my characters take over, and I'm as surprised as the reader when I finish my story.

Some authors set aside a certain number of hours every day for writing, or a certain number of words. In short, a writing schedule.

Long periods of thinking, short periods of writing.

Then there's me. No writing for three or six months, then a flurry of activity where I forget to eat, sleep, bathe, change the cat's litter... I'm a walking stereotype. To assuage the guilt, I tell myself that my unconscious is hard at work. As Hemingway would say, long periods of thinking and short periods of writing.

I've shown you the extremes in writing styles. I think most authors fall in the middle somewhere. But my point is, find out what works for you. You can read about how other writers do it, and if that works for you, great. But in the end, find your own way. That's what writers do.

If you're doing what I do, writing a story that entertains and moves you, you'll find readers who share your tastes. For some of us that means a niche market and for others it means regular appearances on the bestseller list.

Writing is a calling but publishing is a business.

Writing is a calling, but publishing is a business. Remember that *AFTER* you've written your manuscript. Not during.

Now you're ready to face the truth in this paper's title. Writing your novel is the easy part.

Editing

The next step is self-editing. Fixing the mistakes I made in my rush to write it before I forgot it. Several rewrites. Running through it repeatedly with a fine-toothed comb and eliminating clichés like “fine-toothed comb.”

Then what?

There are stories that get rejected because the potential publisher hates them, or feels they won't *sell* (as if he knows), but more are shot down for other reasons. Stilted dialogue. Boring descriptions. Weak characters. Underdeveloped story. Unbelievable or inconsistent plot. Sloppy writing.

That's what you have to fix.

I started by using free online creative writing workshops. What I needed most was input from strangers. After all, once you're published, your readers will be strangers. Every publisher or agent you submit to will be a stranger. What will they think? I always get too close to my writing to answer that. So do you.

I want people to still be reading what I write centuries after I die.

Whenever I got some advice, I considered it. Some I just threw out as wrong, or because I couldn't make the changes without abandoning part of what made the story special to me. Some I embraced. But the point is, I decided. It's my writing. That's my name on the spine, not yours, and I want people reading it centuries after I die. Aim high.

After a time, I didn't feel the need for the workshops anymore. I'm fortunate enough to have a wife whose advice I will always treasure, and after a while that was all I needed. But early on, it would've been unfair to ask her to read my drivel. (I did anyway, but she married me in spite of it.)

It's a novel, not a blog.

Your goal when you self-edit is to get your book as close to “ready to read” as you possibly can. Do not be lazy and do not rush. You want your editor to find what you overlooked, not what you didn't know about, and you want it to be easy. EASY! Easy to edit, easy to read. It's a novel, not a blog.

Your story is your story. You write it from your heart, and when it looks like something you'd enjoy reading, you set out to find a publisher who shares your tastes. What you don't want is for that first reader to lose sight of what makes your story special because you've bogged it down with silly mistakes.

Authors don't pay publishers.

Readers pay publishers.

Publishers pay authors.

Authors don't pay to be published. They are paid for publication. Always. It's just that simple.

Publishers are paid by readers, not authors. That's why they help you find those readers.

Your publisher should also give you some free editing. But there's a limit to how much editing

you can get without paying for it. Do you need more than that? I don't know because I've never read your writing. But if you evaluate it honestly, I think you'll know the answer.

As an editor, I've worked with some authors who simply couldn't self-edit. Non-native English speakers, diagnosed dyslexics, blind authors, guys who slept through English class, whatever. To them, paying for editing was an option. This isn't paying for publication. This is paying for a service, training. Just like paying to take a Creative Writing class at the local community college.

By the way, I don't believe creativity can be taught. Writing, certainly. I took a Creative Writing class in high school, free, and treasure what I can remember of the experience. (It's been a while.) But I already had the creativity, or else it would've been a waste of the teacher's time and mine. (Later I taught Creative Writing in China. We call this irony.)

Your editor will teach you how to self-edit.

If you hire an editor worthy of the name, that editor should teach you how to self-edit. In my case it took two tries, because my first "editor" was a rip-off artist charging over ten times market value for incomplete advice.

The rip-off artist, incidentally, is named Edit Ink, and they're listed on many "scam warning" websites. They take kickbacks from every fake agent who sends them a client. Avoid such places at all costs, and I will stress the word "costs." Ouch!

If you hire an editor, check price and reputation. Consider that you might never make enough selling your books to get back what you pay that editor. Do you care? That's your decision. Either way, your first, most important step on the road to publication is to make your writing the best it can be.

Selecting Your Publisher or Literary Agent

The most important part of getting your error-free manuscript published is choosing the right market. The best way to do this is to read books that are aimed at the same readers as your own. If you want to approach publishers directly, look at who published those books. Their marketing

machine is already positioned to announce your manuscript to your target audience, and they want more books of the type that you write.

Some authors thank their editors. If you're going straight to the publishers, note the editors' names and use those, preferably after a phone call to ensure the editor still works there. If you can, just phone the publisher and tell whoever answers the phone something like "I'm writing a letter to so-and-so and I want to be sure I'm spelling the name right."

If you want to approach an agent first, look in those same books. Some authors thank their agents. Look up those agents and start with them. They've got a track record in your genre. They know

**Welcome to your
daily dose of
rejection.**

how to sell to publishers who are aimed at your target readers, so let them do it.

Whichever method you use, go in fully prepared. You want to convince someone doesn't know you and doesn't want to know you, and who has read too many bad books, that your book is different. For this you need a cover letter, bio, synopsis, and sample chapter of such wit, wisdom, and genius that even the most jaded and cynical editor can take pleasure in it.

Take your time. Don't just whip up something in a day and send it out. You're probably looking at a one- or two-year gap between acceptance and publication. So in the grand scheme of things, taking the time to make your presentation really shine won't matter. *Except*, it'll help ensure you get published in the first place.

Every publisher should have writers' guidelines. Get them. Read them. Follow them. They're using the process of elimination to get out of reading these submissions. The first step in that process is to bump off every author who can't follow the guidelines. Don't be one of them.

More About Your Literary Agent

Here's some advice from the Agent Research and Evaluation website. They define an agent as:

**Agents get
paid *after*
they close
the sale.**

"...someone who makes a living selling real books to real publishers. No one representing himself as an agent should also claim to be a book doctor, an editor-for-hire, a book 'consultant' of any kind. They shouldn't charge any type of 'upfront' reading fee, marketing fee, evaluation fee or any other fee apart from a commission on work sold.

"With the possible exception of certain MINIMAL office expenses, legitimate agents NEVER handle [the expenses connected with submitting manuscripts] as an upfront cost. Only as a billable expense after being shown to have been incurred.

“Remember, real agents live off the commissions they make from selling their clients’ projects. Scammers live off up-front fees for unnecessary, inadequate, or non-existent services.”

Agents work for a percentage of your sales. It’s usually 15%. An agent’s source of income must be the books he sells. If the author pays him before he closes a sale, where is his incentive to close the sale?

If your agent is sending your stuff and its well-written “pitch” to the right places and it’s still getting rejected, you’ve done all you can do, except write better.

Your Query Letter

**Wow, I want
to read this
book.**

This will be their first impression of you. Make it a good one. Edit that letter as hard as you would a manuscript, and make the damn thing perfect. Address it to somebody by name. Make it good writing. Sum up your book in such a way as to make the recipient of the letter say, “Wow, I want to read this book.”

The first page of your book, along with your jacket text, are what usually determines whether a browser buys your book or puts it back on the shelf. As you write your query letter, think of what you’d put on that book jacket, and work that concept into your letter.

Your goal is to get that editor or agent to read your synopsis or manuscript. To judge it on its own merits. If he reads your writing and rejects it, you gave it your best shot. But you don’t want that person to stop reading your submission *before* he gets to your writing.

Your Synopsis

To quote at least one agent, “There is no such thing as a good synopsis.” And how can there be? How do you sum up 50,000 or 100,000 words in a page or two? I’ll tell you how I do it. Very badly.

And yet, this is your first chance to show the publisher or agent that you can write. Some want a minimal amount of information on first contact (query letter, bio, synopsis). Others want the first chapter or two as well. Nobody wants the whole manuscript at first, unless they say so in their writers’ guidelines. If you include sample chapters, the chance of them being read depends largely on the quality of your query letter and synopsis.

Keep your synopsis short, two pages maximum unless the writers’ guidelines say differently. Shorter is always better. Pick out the theme and the strengths of your book and, in as clever a fashion as possible, relay them in a brief chronology. The chronology is less important than the theme because, in truth, your only hope with a synopsis is that your theme or concept will strike a chord with the editor or agent reading it.

If your story is funny, your synopsis should be funny. If it's a romantic story, then your synopsis should be romantic. You're a writer, and here's where you can be creative.

Many great works of literature don't have easily defined stories, just fine writing and good characters. If you have no story, then you have to sell your idea. Your synopsis must have fine, clear writing. Say how your book starts, how it ends, and the interest in the middle. This isn't the time for cliffhangers.

Your sample chapter should do the main talking, but your synopsis should offer up those clever memorable sound bites that will linger in the agent or editor's mind and convince him to read the sample chapter.

Did I mention that your manuscript must be flawless? I'll mention it again. Your manuscript must be flawless. Especially be sure that the first chapter(s), the "hook" that you submit, will be the type that grabs the reader and makes him/her/it wonder what happens next.

Other Publication Options

My goal is to be published in both mediums, ebook and print, because I want all the readers I can get.

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If you know your book just plain won't ever make it into traditional print, print-on-demand (POD) is an option. Some of my books fall into this category.

POD setup fees can range anywhere from US\$100 to well over \$1000, for the same service. Price shop. Also,

remember that POD places publish any author who pays, unedited, giving them a real credibility problem with some reviewers and readers.

The best epubshers will simultaneously publish your work electronically and in POD format, at no cost to you.

A lot of authors swear by self-publication, but the prospect just plain scares me. All that promo, all that self-editing, maybe driving around the countryside with a back seat full of books. I'm a writer, not a salesman. Maybe you're different.

Closing Thoughts

Here's something you've heard before. When your manuscript is rejected — and it will be — remember that you aren't being rejected. Your manuscript is.

Did you ever hang up the phone on a telemarketer, delete spam, or close the door in the face of a

salesman? Of course, and yet that salesman just moves on to the next potential customer. He knows you're rejecting his product, not him.

Okay, in my case I'm rejecting both, but I'd never do that to an author. Neither will a publisher or an agent. All authors tell other authors not to take rejection personally, and yet we all do. Consider it a target to shoot for, then. Just keep submitting, and just keep writing.

The best way to cope with waiting times is to "submit and forget," writing or editing other stuff while the time passes.

And finally, feel free to send an e-mail to me anytime. michaeledits@michaeledits.com. I'll gladly share what I know with you, and it won't cost you a cent.

Also, why not visit my website? It's free. MichaelEdits.com.

I would wish you luck in your publishing endeavors, but I know there's no luck involved. It's all skill and diligence.



Born and raised in coastal North Carolina, Michael LaRocca has been living in Asia for over 10 years, editing for over 20 years, writing for over 40 years, and breathing for about 50 years. After spending 30 years as a failed writer, he wrote eight published books, including EPPIE finalists in 2002, 2004, and 2005.

Michael hasn't driven a motor vehicle since December 1999, and he doesn't care that he's had a dozen bicycles stolen. He's been a technical editor, purchasing manager, computer programmer, repo man, security guard, dishwasher, military electronics specialist, maid, car washer, collection agent, copy machine repairman, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. He's also been paid to masturbate hogs, but he made sure nobody took pictures.

Michael adopted a calico cat from the Hong Kong SPCA in 2000 and he married his lovely Australian bride soon after. They currently live in Hanoi, Vietnam. Jan is a career English teacher who is (you guessed it) teaching English, while Michael telecommutes, plays dutiful househusband, and slaves over his cat.

In this century, he's also edited over 300 published novels as the owner and operator of MichaelEdits.com and stubbornly refuses to outsource anything. But what else would you expect from someone who still writes novels using pen and paper?

