

Ghostwriting: One Size Never Fits All

By Barbara McNichol

In ghostwriting, as in custom tailoring, never expect a one-size-fits-all approach. Here's how I define this term: *I do most of the wordsmithing; you (the author) get all the credit.*

As a work-for-hire arrangement (versus a shared-risk or royalty-based agreement), a ghostwriting approach works well if you have the ideas, want the credibility, but fall short in terms of time . . . or talent . . . or patience.

In my experience, one ghostwriting project rarely duplicates another, therefore don't expect one approach to fit every situation. Just like clothes on the store rack, not every one fits you. Ideally, you "order" your books exactly tailored to your needs.

To give you an idea about customized ways a ghostwriter might work with you, here are some examples.

Case Study: Create Article via Telephone Interviews

A highly respected speaker in NSA knows writing isn't her strong suit, yet organizing her thoughts clearly comes naturally. Working with a ghostwriter matched her verbal talents beautifully—she verbalized her ideas and I transposed and revised them into polished written form.

To begin the ghostwriting process, she would jot down the outline for her article, then make notes about content and examples needed in each section. Next, she'd call me. Over the phone, she'd talk through all the points in her outline and, as I typed what she said, I'd ask clarifying questions. After determining the length and style of articles the targeted publication used, I'd take her ideas and lay down a first draft that was close to 95% complete and on target. We'd discuss the wording nuances that she preferred, I'd produce a second draft, we'd tweak it once more, and voila!—she'd have a well-written article complete with her byline and ready to send off.

The secret to success for telephone interviews: Clearly knowing your message and how to logically bring readers to your desired conclusion. As a result of reading your article, people would know what to think, do, believe, or remember—a noble goal for any written piece.

Case Study: Compose from Marketing Pieces

Another client sent me clippings of columns from the weekly community publication she wanted to submit to. I studied them to get a sense of length, style, tone, use of subheads, bios, and sidebars. She directed me to content on her website and sent me her promo materials. After brainstorming various angles for the article, I suggested a theme and drafted a piece that met all the criteria. Together, we discussed changes, I delivered a second draft and, with a bit more fine-tuning, she had an article that "fit" perfectly—one she could submit with pride.

The secret to ghostwriting theme-based articles: Brainstorm the theme together ahead of time and make sure it's agreeable to both. If you decide later you don't like the theme, prepare to take extra time to rework it and possibly jeopardize deadlines.

Case Study: Derive Articles from Published Books

Another approach to ghostwriting? Ferret out content from chapters in an author's published book and rewrite various segments as articles. One client gave me free rein to pick the subject and scope of the article from her book about parenting. I'd give it a theme and texture that reflected the author's style and fit into most magazines' guidelines. I made sure the article discussed a single stand-alone subject from beginning to end—all within a 300-word limit. The resulting quick-read articles, which were submitted to magazines and published in the author's ezine, drew attention to her book and led to more sales.

The secret to excerpting book chapters as articles: Resist the temptation to bite off too much content for one article.

Customizing in the Manuscript World

Especially when it comes to manuscripts, one size never fits all. You may consider a producing an anthology to be a cookie-cutter approach, but each chapter within it has a different voice, style, and cadence.

The content for ghostwritten books have come to me through one of the following vehicles (or a combination of them):

- Scheduled telephone meetings structured to convey content one chapter at a time, followed by reviews back and forth between the author and me
- Seminar tapes or transcripts adapted into chapter formats
- Material previously published for a variety of purposes (e.g., articles, written speeches, marketing materials, etc.) and rewritten for the book's purpose
- Already published content by the same author, but organized into a different format with a new twist

As an example, the content for Robert Shemin's book *40-Day Plan for Success* combined transcripts from seven CDs recorded during a weekend seminar with a hands-on workbook created six months previously. The workbook has Action Plans that are well suited to the objective of the new how-to book. In fact, I have reorganized his standard seminar content and stories into several books, which have been published by national publishers.

When it comes to ghostwriting, select one who knows how to adapt and maximize your expertise for the page—someone who takes time to understand your ideas and the purpose of your project. Then no one can ever describe your manuscript as "one size fits all."

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