

## Why You Should Hire a Book Coach

**Aspiring authors struggling to get an idea off the ground may benefit from one of these pros.**

By Jenny Rough - June 29, 2015



Author **Liz Alexander** has been writing since she could pick up a pen. For the past 27 years she's worked as a professional journalist with stints in related areas. With 15 nonfiction books to her name, she's also advised dozens of business executives through the publication process as they have put out their own work. But when Alexander decided to write a novel, she was perplexed. Just because

she could write tight copy and craft a meaningful sentence, and had mastered the art of devising fresh angles didn't mean she could tackle fiction. A novel was an entirely different beast. Without a handle on narrative arc and emotion-driven storytelling, she knew what would happen: "I'd be writing really excellent crap." Thinking and reporting her way through this type of book wouldn't work -- she'd have to feel her way through. But how? She decided to hire a book coach.

### **What is a book coach?**

A book coach instructs and supports aspiring authors. Unlike a book doctor (someone who fixes a problem, such as rewriting an ending that doesn't work) and unlike a book editor (someone who gives feedback on a finished manuscript, which may involve macro-level changes or line-by-line polishing), a book coach will see you through the long-range, says **Jennie Nash\***, who has been in the business for four years and previously worked at Random House. A book coach will help you develop your idea, provide ongoing editorial feedback on your manuscript, guide you through the nuts and bolts of queries and proposals, and connect you with agents and editors when your work is ready. Book coaches also provide a fair amount of emotional support. "A book coach will deal much more with the habits of your writing and the doubts you have about what you're doing," Nash says. "You wouldn't expect a book editor or book doctor to get on the phone and listen to you have an emotional meltdown." But Nash has done that -- and then encouraged writers through their crises of faith.

## **"The big advantage to a coach versus, say, taking a class or participating in a writer's group, is the individual attention."**

A children's book writing coach since 2000, **Esther Hershenhorn** likes to describe herself as a compilation of people: cheerleader, fan, teacher. "I assess and evaluate a manuscript and highlight what works and what needs to work better, but then I go a step further and show you how to do it," she says. And she stresses that she's not just investing in a single manuscript; she's investing in the writer. "I care in a 1950s kind of way," explains Hershenhorn.

"Book coaches have been around for a long time, but they've reached a new level of popularity," says **Brooke Warner**, a former executive editor at Seal Press who now coaches writers and attributes the demand for her services to changes in the publishing industry, including the self-publishing revolution. There was a time when an author's agent and publishing house editor basically filled the role of a book coach. While that may still be true in some cases today, it can be difficult for first-time authors to even land an agent -- let alone a book deal -- until they already have a publish-ready manuscript.

### **Do you need a book coach?**

The big advantage to a coach versus, say, taking a class or participating in a writer's group, is the individual attention. While classes and group settings can be an excellent way to build a writing community and may lead to networking opportunities, writers are often limited to bringing a small amount of pages per workshop or semester, plus they need to keep up with the work of other students. That can make for a painfully slow process, and it's precisely why Alexander decided to go with a book coach instead of one of the other options. "I wanted the personalization," she says. "I've been in writer's groups before and you're going to wait a period of time and do your fair bit of reading other people's stuff, and I didn't want to take the time on that." Similarly, **Lindsay Robertson** (name has been changed at writer's request), who has a draft of her first book, is currently shopping for a book coach after she decided against taking a novel-writing workshop at a writer's institute near her home. "For me, personally," says Robertson, "I'd rather have regular feedback than workshop 75 pages once in the fall and 75 pages once in the spring. It feels like too long of a wait for where I am."

Every writer will get something different out of a book coach because every writer has different needs. For example, Hershenhorn, the children's book coach, says some writers just need a critique of a picture book. Others need help moving the story to a more meaningful level or help with research so they can better understand their competition. And still others may think they have a book when, in fact, it's an idea that works better as a magazine story.

### **When should you hire a book coach?**

If the book-writing process is viewed in five stages -- idea, first draft, rewrite, revision and polish -- there are two ideal times to hire a book coach. The first is when you have an idea. "At that stage of the project, writers are usually completely overwhelmed," says

Nash. Where to start? What to do? How to organize? "A book coach can help you with all of those things and set a strong foundation," adds Nash.

**"I'll often see glaring problems in the manuscripts that are being rejected, and then the author is like, 'Oh, yeah, that makes sense.'"**

The idea stage is when Alexander contacted her book coach, **Lisa Cron**. They currently meet twice a month over Skype, and content is due before they talk. Regular deadlines help keep Alexander accountable, but the process unfolded differently than she expected. "I imagined at first I'd be like Stephen King -- you know, get the first draft out in three months and then go back [to revise it]." Instead, Cron had Alexander write several scenes, and the two of them dissected the scenes over a call. "Lisa kept saying, 'You haven't gotten the emotion piece down yet,'" Alexander recalls. Alexander wrote the scenes over. And over. Her characters still came across as bloodless. When Cron coached Alexander through a mini breakdown, Alexander realized she was feeling the exact same emotion her character was experiencing, and she was able to draw on those feelings and express them on the page. She's grateful now that Cron held her back from rushing forward with her story too quickly. To nail down the emotion and psychology of her characters made moving forward easier in the long run.

Warner has most of her clients start with chapter summaries instead of a scene. "I call the process scaffolding," she says. In essence, it's taking a bare bones outline and dressing it up in a way that conceptualizes the whole story before the author starts writing. It leaves enough flexibility for changes when surprising plot points develop. Warner also likes to get a sense of the writer's personality so that she knows how to best help him or her. As a result, she often suggests writers take the Enneagram, a personality profile. If writers have perfectionist tendencies, Warner helps them see that so they don't spend forever fiddling with one sentence. For those who spread themselves thin, she helps them prioritize and focus. And for those who get bogged down in research, she steers them away from too much information gathering.

Nash likes to have her authors draft the book jacket copy first. "It's no more than 200 words, but it's shocking how many writers can't do it -- or can't do it well," she says. "They have no idea what their book is really about, what their point is, why readers might care." Her approach, she explains, helps writers think before they write and thus avoid stumbling blocks down the road.

Even though the idea stage is an ideal place to begin, it can be expensive to hire a book coach from ground zero. To save money, Nash suggests the next best time to hire a book coach is with a revision where "you have gotten as far as you can on your own and are ready to do some tough work." Nash says this is likely somewhere between revision stages three and four. At this point, you've hopefully incorporated initial feedback, and the manuscript has been dissected and rewritten. "You feel like it's in pretty good shape, but you're not going to freak out if somebody says, 'You have to ax these 50 pages,' or 'You're starting in the wrong place.'"

**"The ones that end up getting the [book] deal are persistent, committed and open to criticism."**

Warner and Nash often find that writers come to them too late in the game. "People come to me at the point that they're being rejected by agents and editors, and they can't understand why," Warner says. "I'll often see glaring problems in the manuscripts that are being rejected, and then the author is like, 'Oh, yeah, that makes sense.'" A book coach will help the author dig out of the mess, but this role is more of book doctor (described above). Plus, both Warner and Nash say by then writers are more reluctant to make changes because they're too attached to all the hard work they've already done.

### **How much does a book coach cost?**

Hershenhorn charges \$325 to critique a picture book, which includes assessing the manuscript, writing up notes, researching the marketplace, meeting with the writer for two or three hours, and sending follow-up notes. Or she'll work for an hourly rate of rate of \$125. Nash has three options for writers: a self-study course with videos and assignments for \$49; an Author Accelerator program with weekly feedback from one of her affiliate editors, starting at \$199 a month; or a one-on-one book startup package with her at \$3,200. Warner charges per session but then adds extra fees for excess editorial work. (By comparison, The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland, is offering a 12-month class called "The Novel Year" that is structured like an M.F.A program for around \$5,000; small group workshops led by a private instructor will vary, but one such group in Los Angeles, organized by author **Linzi Glass**, costs \$200 for a four-session workshop). Referrals are probably the best way to find a book coach. Talk with writers who have used a coach, check the acknowledgments section in your favorite novels, and read the client success stories on a book coach's website.

### **What's the secret to success?**

Do book coaches have any insight on why some writers make it to publication and others don't? Book coaches say the difference boils down to two things: perseverance and platform. "The ones that end up getting the [book] deal are persistent, committed and open to criticism," says Nash. And those are the writers, she adds, who are in it for the long haul -- the long haul, of course, means doing the work necessary to build an audience, which leads to the second key component of success: platform.

Good writing matters, too. In the children's book world, Hershenhorn says, "All editors are looking for a good story well told, so well it resounds in the reader's heart." But Warner says that with memoirs and novels, there is a lot of good writing out there, so unless it's a high-concept idea, gorgeous prose might not be enough. Ideally, while writing a book, authors should simultaneously be developing their websites, understanding their competition and learning how to reach their audience. Of course, that can also be an overwhelming task, especially for the introverted sci-fi writer who never leaves his parent's basement. So what's a writer who has trouble with platform to do?

Well, maybe keep an eye out for a marketing coach.

*\*Jennie Nash offers aspiring authors a free, five-day "Book Startup" [mini course](#) with lessons and instructional videos. Mediabistro readers can also **get a 25 percent discount** on the full Book Startup Self-Study Class by writing to [jade@authoraccelerator.com](mailto:jade@authoraccelerator.com) and mentioning Mediabistro (offer expires 12/29/2015).*

***Jenny Rough** is a lawyer turned writer. She writes about books and the writing life in her newsletter, Roughly Speaking. Visit [jennyrough.com](http://jennyrough.com).*