

Book Project Decision Tree

Questions to settle before you write · More Than An Editor · morethananeditor.com · 2026

Most of what a failed book costs is spent before anybody reads a word of it. Work through these before you start.

This is a decision guide, not an encouragement. For some people a book is plainly worth writing. For others it is not, and it is cheaper to find that out now.

Purpose

- **Why do I want to write a book?**
- **What kind is it?** Academic, popular non-fiction, professional or practitioner-oriented, or fiction.
- **If practitioner-oriented:** do I have enough of real value that most practitioners do not already know? Enough to keep them turning pages?
- **Will it support my career goals, or is it primarily a personal project?** Both are legitimate. They produce different books.

Audience

- **Who is my audience?**
- **Is it large enough to support publication?**
- **And who is willing to *pay*?** That is the question a publisher asks, and it is not the same one.

Topic

- **What is my topic, and do I have enough material — or can I get it?**
- **Why is it relevant now?**
- **Will it still be relevant long after publication,** or is its value time-limited?
- **Does it leave room for follow-ups?**
- **Can I convince others with expertise that this topic is worth a book?**

If this comes from your dissertation

A dissertation is not a book. It was written for a committee, to demonstrate competence, under a structure the committee required. **A book is written for a reader who chose it.**

- **Am I basing this on my thesis research — and if so, why?**
- **Do I have enough for a whole book, or enough for one strong chapter?**
- **What has to come out?** The literature review as written. The methodology chapter as written. Most of the hedging.
- **What has to go in?** A reason for a stranger to keep reading.
- **If it is not the same topic:** what research do I still need — qualitative, quantitative, or mixed?

Check prior publication before you pitch. A dissertation deposited with ProQuest is published in the copyright and prior-art sense — **it has a DOI, it is discoverable, and some publishers treat it as prior publication.** An embargo exists for exactly this reason, and most candidates do not know it does. **More at morethananeditor.com/abstract.**

Logistics

- **Am I writing within my expertise, or will I need to interview subject matter experts?**
- **Do I have existing material?**

- **Will it rely on empirical data?** Do I have it, or must I collect it?
- **Is my existing data at risk of becoming dated before publication?**
- **Do I have a timeline, and the free time to hold it?** Honestly?
- **Do I have the discipline to hold it,** or will I need help staying on schedule?
- **Do I already have an outline, and a clear idea of what is in and what is out?**

Help

An editor works on what you wrote. A ghost writer writes it. Those are not the same decision, and for academic and professional work the distinction matters to your reputation.

Our own position, since you may be asking it of somebody: we ghost-write books, op-eds, and board papers freely — **and never anything submitted for academic credit.**

- **Do I want or need an editor?**
- **Do I want or need a ghost writer?** And am I clear which one I am buying?

Will I use AI, and for what?

It is genuinely good at some of this — organizing notes, reformatting citations, producing a first-pass outline, extracting a reverse outline from a chapter you have drafted.

It is genuinely dangerous at the rest. It deletes true material and reports the deletion as a correction. It replaces specific claims with vague ones. It reproduces its own earlier work worse than the first time. **None of it announces itself — no error, no flag, nothing visible on the page.**

Nine documented cases, with the text before and after, are at morethananeditor.com/aifailures. If the book carries your name, somebody who is not a machine has to read every line of it.

Budget

- **Do I have budget for the help I need?**
- **Do I need to budget for publication and marketing as well?**
- **What is my budget in time as well as money?**
- **Are there funding sources** — grants, institutional support, professional bodies — that could cover research costs?
- **Can I get grant money for the research itself,** separately from the writing?

Publishing

- **Academic press, a press specializing in serious non-academic books, or self-publishing?**
- **Have I identified or contacted an actual publisher?**
- **Will I need a book proposal?**
- **Can I pitch before it is finished?** For academic presses, usually yes — and often you should.
- **Do I understand how my route affects budget?** Manuscript preparation, formatting, cover design, ISBN registration.
- **And how it affects marketing?**

A caution on vanity presses

A vanity press charges you to publish and takes no editorial risk.

That is not self-publishing, where you control the process and keep the margin. **And it is not a small independent press,** where somebody judged the book worth publishing.

Ask directly: who is paying whom, and what did they decline last year? A press that accepts everything has selected nothing, and a reader can tell.

If a press approached you unsolicited, with praise and a deadline, treat that as a warning. The pattern is the same one predatory journals use — morethananeditor.com/predatory.

Marketing

- **Do I need a marketing strategy? Do I have one?**
- **Do I want help building one?**
- **Do I have a substantial professional or social network?**
- **Am I interested in doing my own social media marketing?**
- **Am I willing to do traditional promotion** — readings, reviews, conferences, podcasts?

First steps

- **Work through the questions above.**
- **Get somebody to act as a sounding board** — whatever you are writing, fiction included.
- **Define the purpose of the book clearly.**
- **Summarize that purpose in a working title.** It need not be final, but it should say plainly what the book is about.
If you cannot, the purpose is not clear yet.
- **Define the value proposition.** Why does somebody who has never met you finish this?
- **Define the audience.**
- **Think about the initial budget, and be honest.** It will cost more than you think, in time and in money.

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