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Come in...and be captivated...

### [Writers' Craft Box](#)

What this section is intended to do:

Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as



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opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Writer, editor, and writing coach, Noelle Sterne publishes writers' craft articles, essays, and fiction in many print and online venues, including Children's Book Insider, Writer's Digest special issues, The Writer, LivingNow, and 11.11. For over a year, her column in the Absolute Write Newsletter, "The Starbucks Chronicles," shared creative struggles, motivational boosts for writers, and the joys of latté-sipping. Most currently, craft articles and personal essays will appear in Writers' Journal, Writer's World, and two anthologies.

With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Dr. Sterne has conducted an academic coaching and editing practice for over 28 years, guiding doctorate candidates to dissertation completion. Based on her practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). In the spring of 2011, Unity Books will publish her spiritual self-discovery guide for letting go of old mistakes and making real secret life dreams, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (forthcoming website [www.trustyourlifenow.com](http://www.trustyourlifenow.com)).

*Editor's Note: The cautionary tale within this essay concerning the possible pitfalls of self-publishing is an anecdote illustrating the 'look (read, and edit,*

*before you leap' philosophy. The author does not seek to undermine the merits of self-publishing but rather, through the observations here, offers a sound way of approaching it.*

## STOP! READ THIS BEFORE YOU PUBLISH YOUR BOOK

by Noelle Sterne

You've made it real, that sprout of an idea you had way back there. You've forced yourself to sit at your desk daily. You've nurtured, protected, and grown it despite the thickets of demanding duties, seesawing motivation, and self-censoring gales.

And one day, sensing the sprout almost full-blown, the manuscript almost actually finished, you sneak up on the question that's germinated, like the book itself, these many months: What if I self-published it?

Self-publishing, with increased popularity and success stories, has lost its stigma. It no longer exudes suspect vanity but brave entrepreneurship. And self-publishing packages are mightily seductive, with "free" bookmarks, postcards press releases, and website setup help. All you need to do is slap down a credit card and choose a cover design.

I understand its allure. You're enchanted with the thought of holding your baby in your hands, your name staring lovingly up at you. You can hardly wait to whisper modestly to all you meet, from the market bagperson to your boss, "Yes, I've published my book."

As a fellow writer, I wholly understand your struggles to get to this point and your victory on so many levels. I understand your lifelong ache to read your words on paper that's not from your printer.

But please, please—wait. Just because you've told a story doesn't mean you have a viable manuscript. Just because you've amassed a pile of typed pages doesn't mean you've got a book.

The writer's ego, like a dieter's chocolate craving, is insatiable. It falls for the slightest smile, the skimpiest bouquet. Too many writers have succumbed too soon to the seduction of self-publishing and hated themselves in the morning. ]

want to help you and your ego resist this too-easy gratification. When you do, you'll emerge with a much better and more salable book—and isn't that what you really want?

So, before you bind yourself between two covers that can't be recalled like tainted tuna, please, please—pay attention. And learn from my friend Sally.

### Sally Succumbs

After many years of wanting to write and not letting herself, Sally told me she'd started a memoir. It was her story of growing up in a rural town in the far Northwest, kind of a female farmhand Holden Caulfield.

Very glad she finally got to it, I invited Sally to keep me posted. I saw by her reports that she honored her covenant with herself—getting to the office early every day and writing for an hour before anyone else arrived. With our correspondence, my status as friend expanded into the roles of mentor and motivator. She never offered to send me the mounting manuscript, nor did I ever ask.

But as she progressed, she shared her inevitable struggles. I kept reassuring her that the backing and filling, plateaus of indifference, feelings of endlessness, certainty she was spilling out horrid junk, and nagging voice that kept whispering the dread question, "So what?" weren't aberrations peculiar to her self-proclaimed deficiencies. They were, I kept repeating, completely normal parts of the process.

After about eight months, a message popped into my email with the subject "Couldn't contain myself!"

Sally had self-published.

A week later, a signed copy arrived in my mailbox. Sally had given me beautiful acknowledgment and tucked in a note: "I want to know what you really think."

I picked up the book. Okay, not a cheap job. Handsomely printed with a substantial binding and attractive covers. The dark print had ample white space between the lines, and the chapters sported nicely-designed headers.

I began to read. And groaned out loud. From the first paragraph, the flaws leapt out. Did she really want to know what I thought? I felt caught between the twin monsters of endangered friendship and compromised professionalism. Does any author want to hear the truth, especially on work already in print? Why couldn't she have sent an electronic file, even a coffee-stained sheaf of paper-clipped pages? Anything less final. But here in front of me, overrun with defects, was an irrevocable entity—printed, bound, and ISBNed.

I've always revered the printed word; it's magical, even miraculous. As a child and teenager, buried in books before and after homework, I knew that seeing your words in print was the greatest thing you could experience—and still do.

But not at this price. Holding Sally's book, I felt a sick hollow in my gut. And sadness. If only Sally had delayed fulfilling her desire, had pushed the manuscript into a corner for a week (at least), and had come back to it, she might have noticed, recoiled at, and fixed many of the errors I instantly caught.

After arguing with myself for two days about the risks of honesty, my higher self won. I responded as Sally asked. I read the book through, made many notes, and delivered a professional, no-words-minced critique. To my relief and our continued friendship, Sally took it very well, expressed great gratitude, and promised she'd apply my suggestions to the next volume.

#### Seven Lessons from Sally

Much later, Sally confided that she knew she should have edited her manuscript before sending it to the publisher. She said that now she blushed at every page. But she'd become so intoxicated by the accomplishment of finishing her memoir that her excitement swept her into a self-publisher's galleys. Thinking about Sally's experience led me to several cautions for all of us.

1. Don't get carried away by the admittedly great feat of finishing your manuscript.
2. Don't delude yourself into the conviction that your brilliance, unleashed at last, needs no revising. Like food and sleep, every writer, published or not-yet, can't get away without it (see #7).
3. Don't go to your family and friends for confirmation of your masterwork.

They'll be complimentary and encouraging, and you may soak up the recognition you're craved from your mother/father/older brother. But their accolades won't help you in the real marketplace.

4. Do go to a group. Fellow writers can be extremely helpful. Some groups may be too kind, like your relatives, an indication they're either novices or not serious writers. Others, small-minded, may revel in stomping your work into the ground. Avoid either of these extremes; they'll only waste your time and make you feel falsely elated or depressed. Find a group that supports without coddling and critiques without cruelty. Invite—insist on—the members' best editorial attention. Your work deserves it. You may have to swallow hard a few times, but you'll be rewarded by hearing the major faults and learning to tolerate constructive criticism.

5. Get a professional critique. Yes, you'll have to pay for it. But the value of a professional editor is that he/she doesn't know you, doesn't have a vested interest in extolling you to the skies (family, friend) or decimating you into oblivion (jealous writer). The professional's only agenda is, or should be, to help make your work the best it can be.

To find an editor, ask writer friends for recommendations and look at ads that include or offer credentials and credits. Ask for names of satisfied clients, talk to them about the "partnership," and request copies of their finished work.

6. With caution, ask a friend. If you have a friend who's a professional writer or editor, consider asking for a critique. But, as I found, this is tricky—and I chose to give Sally the "gift" of my critique. Friends and money often don't mix. Your friend may not want to charge you, or feel she "shouldn't." After all, you're a friend. You may not want to pay, and feel you "shouldn't"—after all, she's a friend. The remedy, which takes maturity on both sides, is to make your arrangement on an unequivocal business (or barter) basis. This way, your friend won't soft pedal because you're a friend, and you'll feel you got a fully professional critique.

7. Do the writer's work. Harbor no illusions that your first—or third—draft is genius gold. With or without an editor's help, every single one of us needs to grapple with and complete the major tasks of the writer:

Review, reread, rethink, rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. (As James Michener said, "I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter.")

Take breaks and rest your eyes and brain between pages, chapters, segments. Keep at it, and the more you edit, the sharper you'll get. The whole thing may take much longer than you planned, but remember why you're doing it and allow yourself that time. Your goal is not to produce pages but pages worthy of your talent and passion.

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After all these admonitions, you may still feel the pull to self-publish. But please, please—fend off the fires of immediacy and follow the advice here. Then, when your book does come out, it will have more than a decent binding, good white space, smart headers, and eye-catching covers. Between them, it will have what the self-publishing company's package cannot supply— your best and most professional writing. And you'll be truly proud to announce everywhere, every time, to everyone, "Yes, I've published my book."



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