

How to Write a Reference Book

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

Reference books can be a good source of income for a writer because they are steady sellers. In one sense, writing a reference book is simple. You research a topic, gather facts and write your findings. In another sense, writing a reference book can be a tough assignment. It can take months to complete, including hours spent on the trail of facts, figures and ideas. It requires you to organize your tasks in the best possible sequence and to digest the thinking of others. If you follow some basic principles, writing a reference book can be easy and rewarding.

Plan your research

Developing a research plan can save you hours when it comes time to do the research. Determine how you will gather the materials for your reference book. Decide how you will organize your materials. For example, will you use a project binder, sets of file folders, electronic files or a journal? Locate the sources of information for your book and create a plan to gather the information you need. Create a detailed outline to help you keep on track.

Conduct research

Conduct your research on a variety of fronts. Uncover basic facts through background reading. Conduct keyword searches of library catalogs, databases and indexes. Keep track of your findings. Construct a list or complete a graphic overview of what you know, what you need to know and what you want to know. Consider where you will find this information. Let the questions you have developed guide your in-depth research. Evaluate each source of information to determine its credibility, accuracy and if it is current. Organize your research and determine the method that you will use to write the book. For example, will you list data, write narratives, include pictures or add drawings?

Draft your manuscript

As you draft your manuscript, keep the focus on the method you chose to write the book. Present your data honestly and clearly. Although you will be including the research of others, be sure to analyze this information and relate your sources to one another. Avoid overusing one particular source. Avoid overusing direct quotations. To avoid accidental plagiarism, indicate the source of all borrowed facts as you write your draft. Identify clearly where source material begins and ends.

Revise your manuscript

Look at the focus of your work. Determine if it meets all of the requirements of the project. Look at the content and organization. Is your material organized effectively into a logical way with no repetition or gaps? Are all sources summarized, paraphrased or quoted appropriately? Determine if your work matches the purpose and the intended audience. Look at whether you have used transitional words or phrases to move clearly from one point to the next. Rewrite any area that needs changed.

Edit and proof-read

Proper grammar and spelling are essential. Use an editing and proof-reading checklist. Look at the style. Determine if your material is fresh and interesting. Determine if your word choice is correct. Does your manuscript contain accurate and effective words? Determine if your manuscript is formatted properly and covers all of the items from your outline. If you don't know whether it is correct or not, ask someone who knows, look it up in Strunk and White's "Elements of Style," or pay a professional editor/proof-reader.

References

The Elements of Style, 4th Ed.; William Strunk, Jr., E. B. White; 1999 *Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL)* [<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>]

Copyright © 2016 Walter S. Zapotoczny