

An aerial photograph of a dense city skyline, likely Tokyo, taken during the "golden hour" of sunset. The sky is a mix of soft orange, pink, and pale blue. The city is filled with numerous skyscrapers and buildings of varying heights. In the center of the image, the distinctive red lattice structure of the Tokyo Tower stands out prominently. A semi-transparent dark grey rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the main title text in white.

How to Write an Effective Book Description

Five Steps to Self-Publishing

How to Write an Effective Book Description

*The following article was written by Richard Ridley for CreateSpace back in 2011. Despite the age of the piece, Ridley offers a unique perspective to book marketing based on his more than 20 years as a self-published author. It's reprinted here exclusively for students of **Five Steps To Self-Publishing**.*

One of the most crucial elements to selling a book is also probably the most difficult element to create for authors. The book description is your lead in, your chance to hook a reader and get them to crack the cover and satisfy their curiosity. Even in an online environment, the book description can bridge the gap between having just another title among a sea of choices and a sellable book worth reading.

Elements of the Book Description

How to Write an Effective Book Description

The problem is that many authors have a hard time writing a good book description. The main reason it can prove so difficult is because they don't want to leave anything out. As the creator of the material, there's a natural instinct to find a way to cram all or as much of that material into the description. But too many details can render your description confusing and ineffective.

As someone who has failed and triumphed over book descriptions, here is what I have learned through my personal series of trial and error. Call them rules, suggestions or ramblings of an author gone mad, but I've collected these tips by observing and consulting with other authors, both self-published and traditionally published.

1. Don't include subplots. When it comes to the book description, the only thing that matters is the main plot or main theme. That's all you need to focus on when you sit down to write your book description. Including anything else will send you off into an endless loop of "then this happened" moments that will dilute your book description. What is the primary action that drives your book?

2. Keep it under 150 words. This, no doubt, will elicit some moans and groans by a lot of authors. Summarizing a book that consists of tens of thousands of words to just 150 is impossible, right? No. In fact, I am of the belief that you should be able to summarize your book in a single short sentence. Remember, you don't have to concern yourself with the character development and sub-plots, so those tens of thousands of words it takes to adequately draw a reader into a book aren't necessary when it comes to your book description. In the simplest terms, what is your book about and what will make readers interested?

How to Write an Effective Book Description

3. Write in third person, present tense. Even though your book is most likely told in past tense, your book description is not. You are describing this book as if you're sitting face to face with the reader, and they've asked you what the book is about. You wouldn't speak to them in the past tense. In addition, the book description is told from third person point-of-view even if you've written your book from first person point-of-view.

4. Use emotional power words. You are trying to evoke emotions with your book description, the same emotions that your book evokes. To convey these feelings, you need emotional power words like tormented, charismatic, passion, obsession, terrifying, etc. There are too many to mention here, but a quick search for "Power Words" on the internet will produce hundreds of words to choose from. Just be careful not to overdo it. Use power words sparingly and strategically. If I had to put a number on it, I'd say in a 125 word description, you'd use 6-10 emotional power words.

5. You are not the author. You are not writing your book description as the author. You are writing it as the publisher. Making an impact on the reader is your principal concern. What will move the reader to want to know more about your book? What will motivate the reader to add your book to his or her cart? Write the book description with your head, not your heart. Remember, the book description is marketing material - not literature.

How to Write an Effective Book Description

Those are my five main points when it comes to writing a book description. Another good practice when writing your book description is to read as many book descriptions in your genre as possible. It's a great way to figure out what the industry standard is. These descriptions become industry standards for one reason: they sell books.

Here's an example of a book description that I believe gets it right. It's for Gil Adamson's novel, *The Outlander*, published by Harper Collins in 2007.

In 1903 Mary Boulton flees alone across the West, one heart-pounding step ahead of the law. At nineteen, she has just become a widow-and her husband's killer. As bloodhounds track her frantic race toward the mountains, she is tormented by mad visions and by the knowledge that her two ruthless brothers-in-law are in pursuit, determined to avenge their younger brother's death. Responding to little more than the primitive instinct for survival at any cost, she retreats ever deeper into the wilderness-and into the wilds of her own mind.

From the description, I know the book is a psychological thriller featuring a young woman on the run from some very nasty people. I get a hint that her husband may have deserved his fate, but I'm also led to believe that Mary Boulton may be mentally unstable. The description is roughly 90 words. It's told in third-person, present tense, and I count seven emotional power words ("heart-pounding," "frantic," "tormented," "mad," "ruthless," "primitive," and "wilds"). I only know the main plot: she killed her husband, and now she's a fugitive running for her life. I picked up the book because of its cover, but I opened the book because of this description. I now own it.

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You're not just writing your description for your back cover. You're also writing this for your social media network, as part of your bio information for personal appearances, for flyers and other print material, etc. This isn't just for you; it's for your fans. With a concise book description, they are more likely to copy and paste it into an email to friends and family or on their own social networking accounts. Think of this type of description as being portable. It's easy to share and, as a result, is a major tool in your spread-the-word campaign.

I will leave you with this: you may get it wrong the first time you try to write a book description, and that's okay. It's just another part of the process. As you go through various versions, don't delete those earlier ones. I've found that by combining the elements of the latest version with earlier versions, I hit pay dirt. Good luck, and happy selling!