The art and craft of writing nonfiction.

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO

10 Tips To Make Your Book More Sellable

All the agents I tried turned down my book," a former student told me last week. "Maybe it's time to give up. "

I thought: *Now's the time to get to work.* After all, my first memoir was rejected by 30 agents and 30 editors before it landed with my dream publisher, Random House. My debut novel took 13 years from start to publication (so instead of a book launch, it got a "Book Mitzvah"). My bio now says that I'm the author of many books that my family hates (in eight different genres). I'm also a long-time writing professor whose students have published 700 books in different categories in the last decade—with advances between $1,000 and $500,000. So, I know firsthand how publishing a book can be a slow process.

But over the years, I've learned ways to make it more likely your manuscript will sell, despite the tough market and myriad obstacles. Here are some methods that may breathe life into your unpublished project.

1. PUBLISH A SHORT PIECE ON YOUR SUBJECT

It's far easier to write three great pages than 300, and the best way to "get heat on" your project. Don't try to sell an "excerpt" for publicity. Write an engaging stand-alone personal essay or op-ed on your topic. Christina Wyman's *Washington Post* piece wound up selling her middle-grade novel *Jawbreaker.* Tiffanie Drayton's *New York Times* opinion became the memoir *Black American Refugee*. My coauthor Kenan Trebinčević's essays in *The Wall Street Journal, Newsday, Salon, Slate*, and *HuffPost* not only led to his middle-grade debut *World in Between*, but they helped him with structure, as each short clip expanded into a whole chapter.

2. FINISH YOUR BOOK

A colleague recently complained they couldn't sell their 30-page memoir proposal. That's not writing a book. That's creating a sales pitch outlining what you're going to write. While you usually need a full manuscript to sell a debut novel, poetry, and short stories, I've also sold four memoirs, two self-help books, an anthology, and kid-lit *after* they were completed (averaging 60,000 words). Most new authors need to do more legwork before landing a book deal. The more pages you produce, the greater the possibilities. Although I wouldn't spend years traveling and researching a biography without a contract, I did hundreds of interviews for my recent memoir *The Forgiveness Tour*, which only found a small publisher once it was done.

3. REPACKAGE YOUR PROJECT

When the student who was upset she couldn't land an agent shared her title, I wondered if the boring moniker alone killed it. A sexy, compelling, or funny title—and subtitle for nonfiction—can make all the difference (says the author of *Five Men Who Broke My Heart* and *Lighting Up: How I Stopped Smoking, Drinking and Everything Else I Loved in Life Except Sex*). I've also questioned aspiring writers crafting proposals with two or three authors listed on the cover (much harder), extensive artwork and photos attached (too expensive), a tired cliché pitch, or inventing their own categories (which can be impossible).

4. GET CRITIQUED

Nobody I know ever finished their book at three in the morning, sent it to an agent the next day, and made a sale. Be open to getting feedback on your rough drafts. I personally trust the wise, experienced members of my long-time writing workshop. Many students have received useful feedback in undergraduate and graduate classes

and from beta readers they've found through groups and colleagues.

5. REVISE AGAIN

Work is often sent out too early. If multiple agents and editors who say no point out what the problems are, return to the proverbial drawing board to fix it—especially the first line, paragraph, page, and chapter. Writing can always be improved. In fact, I've rarely read anything that couldn't be made better, including many tomes already in print (thus my previous career as a book critic). I remind my students of the adage "The harder I work, the luckier I get."

6. GET GHOSTED

While I love my professors, mentors, and weekly groups, I didn't break into the big leagues until I hired a professional book doctor—a former Doubleday editor—to kick my manuscript into shape behind the scenes. If you can afford it, use a ghost editor, developmental editor, or freelance editor (as they're also called) who are current or former agents or book editors and thus know the market. Although they can't guarantee a sale and don't come cheap (I paid $2,200 to get 220 pages line edited with extensive comments) the rewards can be vast: My first advance was $50,000 from an editor who wound up buying my first three books. I'd only hire someone who came with a strong recommendation from someone you trust.

7. RECONSIDER YOUR CATEGORY

Several of my unpublished memoirs found a second life as self-help books and novels (as I explained in a chapter of my writing guide *The Book Bible*). Rejiggering your genre to better fit the market is so common, it's a thing! My former student Jeff Henigson's adult memoir morphed into the young adult book *Warhead* and Jodi M. Savage's memoir became the essay collection *The Death of a Jaybird*. Amy Klein's true-life story transformed into the self-help book *The Trying Game*. Although the external formats were altered, the final result remained true to their story and soul.

8. GET ENDORSED

Having a luminary in your field write your intro or a foreword can lend credibility. Congressman Jamie Raskin weighed in on my coauthored memoir *American Shield*, and my *New York Times* editor and a famed literary agent wrote the short intros for my writing guides. Start by going through connections and offering a small stipend (though some may offer to do it gratis). Advance blurbs also help. Think of a higher-up at your university, office, or among your fellow alums who might offer a brief endorsement (for free) or somebody who has already offered you praise. When my student Aspen Matis' Modern Love column about walking the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail came out, *Wild* author Cheryl Strayed and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof cheered her essay on social media. When she asked, they both generously allowed her to use their words for blurbs for her subsequent HarperCollins memoir *Girl in the Woods*.

9. PROMOTE YOUR PROJECT ON RADIO, TV, OR PODCASTS

It's not as hard as you think. While some businesspeople hire publicists or media consultants to help, publishing a 500-word provocative opinion piece on a timely subject can inspire more press. But don't share what everyone already knows. Bold and counterintuitive slants and unusual solutions get more juice. My colleague Diana Kirschner, a relationship therapist, mentioned on a radio interview that she could help her patients find *Love in 90 Days*, which ended up being her debut book title from Hachette.

10. BE A GOOD LITERARY CITIZEN

Chasing checks and bylines can be selfish, myopic, and meaningless without charity or community. After years as a book critic, I worked as a teacher who helped younger generations break into the business. Whenever I've been frustrated that my career isn't soaring, I throw a book launch for debuts by students, or use my platform to champion marginalized authors who wouldn't have that limelight. If you can't afford a party or new book, borrow it from the library, take a picture of the cover and post, tweet, or write a good review on Amazon, B&N, or Goodreads—not famous authors you want to kiss up to, but small press debuts who could desperately use the exposure. I'm convinced my ongoing success has come from a combination of hard work and good karma. **WD**

Susan Shapiro is the bestselling author/coauthor of books her family hates like *Five Men Who Broke My Heart, Unhooked, Lighting Up, The Byline Bible*, and *The Forgiveness Tour*. An award-winning writing professor, she now teaches writing and publishing classes online. Follow her on Instagram at @profsue123 or email her at Profsue123@gmail.com.