

I Could Write a Book!

By Linda S. Forst
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How many times have you said "I could write a book" during your shift or debriefing? The fact is police officers see many things that the ordinary person does not. This includes much heartache and sadness with people at their lowest as well as people at their best. Why would you want to write it down? When could you find the time to write it down? Would someone want to read what you write? How do you go about writing? This article will give you a brief overview of the writing process and some help with how to get started. There are lots of resources available and lots of people willing to help. We will briefly address the who, what, when and where of writing.

Why Write?

First of all, law enforcement is a stressful occupation and it is healthiest to try and alleviate some of that stress before going home to your loved ones. There are many ways to do this including exercise, hobbies, socializing and reading. Writing can serve as a stress reducer for some as the process of putting your thoughts down on paper can be cathartic. Keeping a journal, whether filled with writing ideas or used to vent your emotions can be healthy.

Secondly, though at the time you say "I should write a book" you think you'll never forget the call you're on, you will. Many police officers have found old reports they've written or notes they've made 10 years after the fact and do not remember the incident or have a hazy recollection of it.

Thirdly, you have information to share. You will experience things most non-law enforcement individuals do not and many people would like to read about it in the form of a fictional story or a memoir of life as a police officer. There may also be police officers struggling with certain issues that if they were to find out other officers have experienced similar problems and read about how they got through it, it may help them deal with the problem. Lastly, as you go through your career you will develop certain expertise as you choose your career path and that information could be valuable to individuals desiring to follow a similar career path. This information could also be shared with the general public looking for answers to problems or help understanding how or why things are done.

When Do I Write?

As with any goal you set; the larger the goal the more intimidating it appears. You need to break your goals down into small pieces and tackle them one at a time. If you're looking to remember as much of the calls that you're handling and people you are contacting as possible you need to make notes as soon as possible after the incident. The more frequently you jot down the information the less you will have to write at a time and the less intimidating it will be. Try making notes when you get home after your shift or while on meal break. If there's too much information and you're duplicating your police report perhaps you want to make a copy of your report if your department allows.

If you are ready to do some lengthy writing set a goal of a page a day or whatever feels comfortable to you. If you set the goal small you are more likely to tackle it and most likely will end up writing more than your minimum requirement. If you write a page a day; you will have 30 pages in a month, and 365 pages (a book?) in a year. This is only the beginning, however, as after you have attained your goal you must then proceed to editing and rewriting your piece.

Editing is often better done in larger quantities of writing such as your entire magazine article or a chapter in a book in order to not lose the flow of the information.

What Would I Write About?

Think about your job and some interesting calls you've handled. Think about the weird calls you've told your coworkers or family and friends about. These could be part of a memoir or true crime article or the basis for a fictional short story or novel.

Examine the expertise you have gained over the years and things you have been asked to teach or share with other officers. These topics can serve as the basis for a nonfiction article in a law enforcement magazine. The information you routinely provide to community groups could be expanded into an article for the newspaper or a magazine.

Reflect on emotions that have arisen during particularly sad or touching calls and you may have the makings of a personal essay or poem.

The type of writing you choose to do will depend on what areas you feel most comfortable writing about and where you think your strengths lie.

Who Would Want to Read What I Write?

As we stated earlier, there are many types of people who would be interested in reading what you write whether for entertainment or educational purposes. If you have a flair for storytelling you will be able to entertain people. If you are writing to educate coworkers and colleagues across the country they will be interested in reading your articles to gain the benefit of your expertise and experience.

Where Are These People And How Do I Reach Them?

There are organizations that can help you in the writing process. They can help you in the mechanics of writing as well as the business of writing. The mechanics of writing can be aided with the help of writing books from your library or bookstore or writing courses at your local community school or college. Writing clubs found through libraries, bookstores, colleges or the Internet can also provide support and encouragement.

The business of writing includes how to write an article that will sell and how to market it to the potential buyers. You need to know the markets including what publications are interested in the types of articles you write, which are most likely to use freelance writers, how to contact these publishers, and how to market your ideas to them. These organizations can be composed of writers, editors and literary agents and often provide newsletters and seminars to keep their members informed of the latest developments in their field as well as assisting in their networking. Searching on the Internet will turn up many writing groups to investigate. One of the best resources for police officers is the POLICE WRITERS CLUB.

What is the Police Writers Club?

The POLICE WRITERS CLUB is an organization of published and unpublished writers in the criminal justice field. It provides police writers with information and resources to assist them in

their writing careers as well as the networking so invaluable to the process. Included among its members are authors of novels, magazine articles, instructional books, and even poetry. The club provides a website (www.policewriter.com) which includes links to other sources, member books, resources, a sample of their newsletter and information on upcoming conferences. When joining the Police Writer's Club you will be provided with 2 valuable publications to aid you in your writing. They are "Sharing Your Expertise: Writing for Law Enforcement Publications" and "Law Enforcement-Related Publications and Editors." These publications will start you on your way with regards to the writing process and markets that might be applicable for your writing. This club was started by Captain Roger Fulton after he retired from the New York State Police in 1990 and was involved in his writing career. There are now over 200 members in the club. The first annual conference of the Police Writers Club was held in Williamsburg, VA in early November 1997 and the second annual was just held in November 1998. The conferences were attended by approximately 50 individuals interested in finding out more about writing. Session topics included getting published, publicity, copyrighting, writing magazine articles, and writing books. The presenters were all successful writers in their field. As with any conference much of the learning went on outside of formal sessions through networking with the presenters and the other attendees. Some of these attendees had previously had work published. Sharing experiences and hearing of early rejection followed by subsequent success helped to motivate many attendees.

Sarah Cortez, a deputy with Harris County Precinct 4 in Texas who has been writing and publishing since 1992, found the conference to be motivating and came away with many new ideas. Attending the conference and talking with other writers helped her to view her writing as a profession and allocate time and resources to it. Sarah has 2 poems published in anthologies and her poems and personal essays have been published in 6 different magazines including WomenPolice.

She is currently negotiating a book contract.

Pamelia Stratton, a Special Agent for the FBI based in Philadelphia, has attended both PoliceWriter conferences. Ms. Stratton found the information about the business of writing to be particularly valuable and the conference opened up a field of writing (magazines) she had not previously thought about. After her first conference, Ms. Stratton's goal was to submit entries for the writing contests held at the annual conferences. She exceeded her goal in that she received the first place award in the nonfiction category and the second place award in the fiction category. She has returned home with renewed energy toward her writing.

It has been found that even the most experienced and prolific writers occasionally experience writer's block or a lack of motivation. The conference can provide motivation that lasts throughout the year through the network of supporters that you will meet and can call if you need a push. Many of the attendees send each other their work to critique.

It is anticipated that 1999 will bring the "third annual" conference based on the success of the previous ones. If you have thought about writing or have caught yourself saying "I should write a book" contact the Police Writers Club and get going on your second career.