



Everyone Judges a Book by its Cover

And what you can do about it

Like it or not, no one reads the book before he or she makes a buying decision. Consumers do not read it in the store. Sales reps only carry book covers and jackets to show store buyers while wholesalers and distributors say “just send us the cover copy.” All buying decisions are made on the illustration/design and the sales copy on the outside of the book. Yes, packaging is everything.

Each year, U.S. industry spends more than \$50 billion on package design. Now, that is not \$50 billion for the packages and certainly not for the contents. That money is for the *design* of the packages. Packages prompt buyers to reach for the product whether it is pantyhose, corn flakes or hair spray.

Stores have tens-of-thousands of books being displayed spine-out. With all this congestion, it is hard to get attention. Initially, all a potential buyer sees is the book’s spine. If the browser takes it down, he or she will gaze at the cover about four seconds and the flip it over to read the back cover. On average, he or she will spend just seven seconds here so the trick is to keep them reading longer. Your copy has to be punchy and benefit-laden; it has to speak to the potential buyer.

Your book cover designer will lay out the package and incorporate the illustration, put it all on disk and send it to your printer but you must draft the sales copy. This book cover worksheet will take you step-by-step through the sales-copy draft process. Use your computer so you will be able to move the copy around once entered.

Here are explanations for each area of the outline.

A. Front cover. Select a working title and subtitle. Keep the title short and make the subtitle descriptive.

List the most important person in your field (association or industry) for the foreword (and please note the spelling of *Foreword*.) You will try to get them to pen the foreword later.

B. Spine. Stack the **title** on the spine so it will read more easily on the shelf. Use a bold, san-serif, vertically-legged typeface such as Arial Black, bolded.

C. Back cover.

1. **Category.** Visit a bookstore and check the shelf where your book will be displayed. Note the categories on the books and the shelves. Listing the category on the back cover of your book will insure your book will be easy to find—because the bookshop personnel will place it on the right shelf.

2. Now you need an arresting **headline** addressed to potential buyers. You want them to relate to the book and find themselves in it. Do not repeat the title here; do not bore the potential buyer. You have already “said it” on the front. Use an alternate approach. For example, *The Self-Publishing Manual’s* back-cover headline is *Why Not Publish Yourself?*

3. **Sales copy.** Concisely (two to four sentences) state what the book is about. What will the reader gain by reading this book?

4. **Bulleted promises or benefits.** Promise to make readers better at what they do. Pledge health, wealth, entertainment or a better life. Be specific. Focus on who your audience is and what they want. Think: about who are you talking to and what are they going to get from the book.

You will discover:

- (benefit)
- (benefit)
- (benefit)
- (benefit)

5. **Testimonials and endorsements.** Dream up three different endorsements from people you would *like* to quote. If *This book changed my diplomatic strategy.*—Colin Powell, would look good, *try* it. Use *names* or *titles* recognizable in your field—sources that might impress potential buyers. This is just a draft; dress it up. You will secure some of these quotations later.

6. Show the **author** is the ultimate authority on the subject. Just two or three sentences will do.

7. End with a **sales closer** in bold type. Ask the book-browser to buy the book. Use something like *This book has enabled thousands to . . . and it will show you the way too.*

8. **Price.** Bookstores like a price on the book. The price is a turn-off to potential buyers so place it at the end of the sales copy. Never locate the price at the top of the back cover. If this is a hardcover book, place the price at the top of the front flap.

9. **Bar code** with International Standard Book Number (ISBN). The bar code on a book identifies the ISBN, which in turn identifies the publisher, title, author and edition (hardcover, etc.). Make room for, but do not worry about, the bar code and ISBN just now.

Your **title**, **subtitle**, back-cover **headline** and **benefits** may be swapped. Once you have them written down, you may wish to move some of them around. Perhaps one of your benefits would be a better subtitle.

Most back cover copy is weak and uninspiring. The title is repeated and then is followed by several quotations and a bar code and that’s it! Haphazard copy is the sign of lazy (and maybe inexperienced) copywriter. This lack of effective competition on the shelf gives us the upper hand.

Book cover illustrations and design have improved tremendously over the past 20 years. Author/publishers used to spend all their efforts on the text and the cover became an afterthought. Some publishers remember it was Robert Howard who brought bright, insightful, relevant, remarkable covers to the industry. There are many great cover designers today and it was Robert Howard who started it all.

A good cover artist will read through your book and create a cover that will reflect the message of the text. The cover and text should match.

Years ago, we said “Write your ad before you write your book.” This was to help you focus on who you were writing to and what you were going to give them. Then we realized the most important ad you will ever write is your back cover copy. Now we say: “Write your cover copy before you write your book.”

Packages sell products and covers sell books. Give your books the opportunity in the marketplace they deserve. Package your text to quickly tell the idle browser what is inside.

Editor’s note: Dan Poynter is the author of more than 100 books. He is best known for *The Self-Publishing Manual* (16 revised editions in 29 years). In the back of that book, he asks readers to send their book once published; he receives 15 to 20 books each week! He says that cover art is improving but the sales copy still needs work on many of them. See <http://ParaPub.com>



(Back Cover)

Book Covers Work Sheet

(Front Cover)

Category:

Headline:

Sales copy/description. What is the book about?

Promises & Benefits

You will discover:

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-
-
-
-

Testimonials:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Why the author is qualified to write this book:

Closing copy:

Price: \$

(ISBN and bar code)

(Spine)

T
I
T
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E
of
B
O
O
K

Your last name

Title:

Subtitle:

Author's name:

Foreword by: