

Before you write your book.

7 decisions that shape everything

Before your book has a title, it has a place in your life. It's the idea you return to on a flight home. The story someone keeps asking you to tell. The explanation you've given so often that a colleague finally says, "You should write this down."

You may have been carrying it for years.

Deciding to write a book gives that possibility a future. The decisions that follow give it direction: what it will offer, who will read it, and how you'll make room to create it.

You don't need perfect answers before you begin. You do need a few honest ones. These seven decisions will help you see the book more clearly - and determine whether now is the time to bring it into the world.

BY BRENT COLE

Purpose / Reader / Material / Voice
Publishing / Commitment / Timing

01

Decide what you want the book to make possible

Picture the book a year after publication. Someone has read it, and something has happened that makes you glad you wrote it.

What happened?

A business leader invited you into a conversation you couldn't previously reach. Your children came to understand a part of your life you'd never explained. Someone facing a difficult decision found language for what they were struggling with.

Each is a worthwhile reason to write. Each points toward a different book.

If your goals are connected to your business, think beyond copies sold. What else might the book help someone understand, trust, or choose? What could it make possible for your work?

You can have several hopes for the book. Give one of them priority. That choice becomes useful when you're deciding whether to include a story, pursue a publishing opportunity, or spend another month developing a chapter.

Start here: Complete this sentence: "Writing this book will have been worth it if _____."

Be specific enough that the answer could guide a decision.

YOUR NOTES

02

Decide whose attention you want to earn

“Anyone who wants a better life” sounds like a generous audience. It gives you very little help with the writing.

Think of one person who would have a strong reason to pick up your book. What are they facing? What have they already tried? What do they suspect but struggle to explain?

A founder hiring a first leadership team needs something different from an executive preparing to hand over a company. Both may be interested in leadership. They are carrying different questions.

Knowing your reader helps you judge how much background to provide, which examples will feel familiar, and where an idea needs more explanation. It also helps you recognize the story you love that belongs somewhere else.

You aren't limiting who can benefit. You're giving the book someone to speak to clearly.

Start here: Name a real person who represents your intended reader. Write down the question you hope your book helps them answer.

YOUR NOTES

03

Decide what your experience gives you the standing to say

Your most useful material may be something you no longer find remarkable.

You've handled a certain kind of problem for so long that you forget other people are encountering it for the first time. You know which warning signs matter, which advice sounds good until you try it, and what a decision can cost beyond the obvious expense.

That is the kind of knowledge a reader comes to a book to find.

Begin gathering the experiences behind what you believe. Look for moments when you changed your mind, took responsibility, misunderstood someone, or learned something you could not have learned from a distance.

Then test the idea those experiences seem to support. Can you explain when it works? Where are its limits? What would someone need to know before applying it?

One hard-earned insight, examined closely, can be more valuable than a shelf of broad advice.

Start here: Choose three experiences that changed how you think or act. Beside each, write what another person could use from it.

Keep a separate list of the details you'll need to recover or verify.

YOUR NOTES

04

Decide what it should feel like to spend time with you on the page

Your voice is part of the value of your book.

Readers should encounter your judgment, your humor, your curiosity, and your way of approaching something difficult. But reproducing that presence takes more than transcribing your conversations.

When you speak, your expression can soften a blunt sentence. A pause can signal uncertainty. A laugh can make it clear that you're the subject of your own joke. On the page, the writing has to provide that understanding.

Think about the effect you have when you communicate well. Do people feel more capable? Challenged in a useful way? Understood? Ready to reconsider something?

That gives you and a writing partner a better starting point than a list of favorite phrases.

A representative passage can then test the direction before an entire manuscript is written. Read it for meaning and for feeling. Accurate words can still create the wrong impression.

Start here: Finish this sentence: "After a good conversation with me, people tend to feel _____."

Then ask someone who knows you well whether they agree.

YOUR NOTES

05

Decide what you need from a publishing path

It's easy to picture a familiar publisher's name on the spine before considering what that partnership needs to accomplish.

Begin with the practical questions. How do you expect readers to discover the book? Do you already have a way to reach them? How much control do you want over timing, pricing, and the ways the book can be used?

A traditional publisher may bring valuable editorial guidance, sales relationships, and access to a wider market. Securing that partnership is competitive, and the pursuit itself can take time without producing an offer.

Self-publishing allows you to fund the work, choose your team, and direct the release. It also puts responsibility for the publishing operation on your side. A hybrid publisher can provide a team and infrastructure, with services and financial terms that need careful examination.

You may not be ready to choose yet. You can still identify what matters most and what you're willing to trade to get it.

Start here: Rank these priorities: control, speed, upfront investment, publishing support, and access to readers beyond your existing audience.

Use that ranking when evaluating an actual opportunity.

YOUR NOTES

06

Decide what you can commit

A book requires money, attention, and decisions. Plan for all three.

Financially, understand the complete undertaking. Writing, editing, design, production, distribution, and marketing may be included in one engagement or handled separately. Ask what you'll have when each stage ends and what still needs to be funded.

Your time deserves the same clarity.

Even with an excellent writing partner, you'll need to participate in conversations, share source material, review the work, and make decisions. Some of that work may be energizing. Some may ask you to revisit experiences you haven't examined closely in years.

Look at your actual calendar. Where can this work live? Who can help gather records or coordinate interviews? How quickly can you realistically respond to a chapter?

A good collaboration makes thoughtful use of your involvement. It works best when that involvement has a place in your life from the beginning.

Start here: Ask any prospective partner to explain the full cost, your expected participation, and the decisions only you can make.

You should be able to picture an ordinary month of working together.

YOUR NOTES

07

Decide why now - and what can wait

There may be a clear reason to move: a business transition, a speaking opportunity, a milestone, or a chance to record stories with someone whose perspective matters.

There may also be a good reason to allow more time. A central experience could still be unfolding. Essential material may be missing. Your current responsibilities may leave too little room for thoughtful participation.

Separate a meaningful deadline from a hopeful date.

“Books delivered for an October event” is a specific commitment. “Published this fall” leaves important questions unanswered. A finished manuscript, an ebook available for purchase, and printed copies in your hands are different milestones.

Work backward from the outcome you need, with the people responsible for delivering it. Allow time for review and for the work that follows manuscript approval.

And if you aren’t ready for the full project, begin preserving the material. Record the conversation. Gather the letters. Make notes while the details are still clear. That work will be useful whenever the book begins.

Start here: Write down your strongest reason to begin now, the biggest obstacle, and one step you can take this month.

YOUR NOTES

You don't need to see every chapter yet

You may finish these questions with a sharper idea for your book. You may discover that its real purpose is different from the one you first imagined. You may decide to gather more material before making a commitment.

Each is progress.

What matters is beginning with a clear enough purpose to guide the work and a realistic understanding of what it will ask of you. A thoughtful conversation with an experienced writing partner can help turn those early answers into a book you can see how to create.

For now, keep your answers. Return to the one that feels most important.

Somewhere in those few sentences is a person you want to reach, something your experience has prepared you to give them, and a reason it matters.

That is a promising place for a book to begin.

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YOUR NOTES