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# BUILDING A BOOK AUDIENCE WITH SHORT STORIES OR EXCERPTS

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The thing about writers is that we are always coming up with something new to write. This stands to reason, because if we had one great idea, chances are good we're going to have another. Sometimes, however, those ideas come one right on top of the other, and it can make our writing lives confusing. Perhaps we are working on a self-help book, but something we cut from it seems like it might make a great magazine article. Maybe we are working on a novel, but the prologue seems like it would make a great short story for that upcoming contest.

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## **So, what's the best strategy for dealing with all these great ideas?**

- Should you stop forward momentum on a non-fiction book to try to write articles?
- Should you take time out from a novel to polish a short story – or two or three?
- And if you DO decide to write, finish, and polish a short story or article, how can you best use it to support your long-term goal of attracting readers to your book? Should you submit it to contests, make it into an e-book to sell through a vendor like blurb or medium or Kindle Singles, or give it away for free?

**There's obviously no easy way to answer these questions, but here are a few things to consider.**

### **1. ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT PROCRASTINATING?**

We tend to start talking about side projects when the long slog of writing a book begins to wear on us. It's our "way out" of the many months of writing alone and writing in the dark. Completing a short story or article offers instant satisfaction. It feels tangible, while your book still may be years away from becoming something you can hold in your hands. This may be exactly what you need to continue to feel good about your writing life, but just make sure you're doing it with intention and consciousness and not just because writing a book takes so darn long.

## 2. ARE YOU CLEAR ABOUT HOW MUCH TIME WRITING A GOOD SHORT STORY OR ARTICLE TAKES?



It's often not as fast as people think. You have to go through the same process of really digging into your idea and your ideal audience, and determining a great structure, and getting the idea out of your head and onto the page, and bringing in beta readers to make sure your story resonates. If you are going to try to pitch the piece, you need to understand submission requirements and align your work to those requirements (is it 6,000 words for a short story contest or 8,000?); pay attention to the the deadlines (does the magazine, journal, or website have a “reading period” ?); and bring someone in to copyedit and proofread it. It may not be as quick a project as you hoped, and it may take a lot of energy away from your main project. Can you afford to do that? Weigh the costs and benefits before you take the plunge.

### 3. WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE BY FOCUSING ON THE SHORT PIECE?

There are so many answers to this question, but you should be crystal clear about your why.

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- **Offering free material** to readers while you are waiting to deliver the book can be a fantastic way to **build an email list of fans**. Having a robust email list is still considered by almost every expert to be one of the primary ways to guarantee a book's success. This is true no matter what genre you are writing. Email list members are your super-fans, and you want to give your super-fans as much of you and your work as you can so that when your book comes out, they can't wait to buy it. *How* you offer the free material is a whole other decision. [Here is a breakdown](#) of various methods and here is a fantastic piece from [Chris Garret on copyblogger](#) on how to decide when to give something away for free and when not to. It can be a dizzying decision – and as with everything else, knowing what your ultimate goal is will help enormously.
- **Offering short work for a small price** (99 cents, for example) can achieve some of the same results as the free method PLUS you can make some cash, which is always a good thing. But just beware that at 99 cents, you are stepping into the waters of regular book discount pricing. Many book promotions (through [Bookbub.com](#), for example) offer full-length books at that price. There is a raging debate about whether that is too low for a full-length book (for a taste of the debate, [see almost any random discussion on the Kindle boards.](#)) A writer of short pieces needs to make the same decision about what is most important to them at this point in time – more downloads and exposure or a little cash in hand. Your goal could change depending on how many short pieces you have to offer, and how far out you are from your main project being ready for sale.
- **Exposure in a magazine, journal, or website that your ideal reader reads** can be invaluable for a book author. Agents and editors may discover you there, as can fellow writers, and your target audience. Here is a piece from [Writer's Digest](#) on the various benefits of this tactic.
- **Winning a contest can add a feather in your cap** that you can use in your author profile or bio, or in a query letter to agents. It gives you the “social capital” that readers are often looking for – the proof that your work is worth reading. It also, obviously, feels good to know your work resonates with readers. Note that some contests require your work not to be published anywhere else; having your short story up on Amazon or offered by another vendor may make you ineligible.
- **Getting together with other authors to offer a collection of short work** can be an effective way to increase your connections in the writing community, get exposure to new readers, and get your work out into the world. Taking time to make connections to other writers is an important part of the work we do, too.

The bottom line? Understand how your short work fits into your overall strategy for connecting with readers. If it makes sense to take the time to polish up some short work and get it out into the world while you are working on your book, do so with intention and enthusiasm and with the same set of standards you hold yourself to in your main project.



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