



THE NEW ZEALAND
SOCIETY OF AUTHORS
(I HĒ NEW ZEALAND I NGŌ TE PLŪNI KĀTIHU O AOTEAROA)

Ghostwriting Fact Sheet

Ghostwriting is an agreement between a commissioner (the person, publisher, business or organisation who wants the work written) and the ghostwriter (the person commissioned to write the work) to produce a piece of written work. People generally engage a ghostwriter to help them for one or all of the following reasons:

1. They don't have enough time to write the work themselves
2. They don't believe they have the skills needed to produce a publishable work.
3. They are a publisher wanting a book written on a subject who is unable to write it themselves.

The ghostwriter acts as a facilitator who assists the commissioner to communicate their story or theory. And whether it's sorting through a jumble of letters, documents and notes, or starting from scratch, the project needs careful planning to ensure you cost it correctly.

Good ghostwriters are skilled at organising material, picking out the salient points and identifying topics and issues to highlight in a writing project. They must be able to focus on the commissioner's subject matter and organise and write it to reach the target audience.

The ghostwriter should write in the style the commissioner sets so that their interests and/or the interests and personality of the subject (the person you are writing about) show through. This can be difficult if the writer has a strong personality. However, it does need to reflect the commissioner or subjects preferred style and tone.

The commissioner bears full responsibility for the contents of the book, but the ghostwriter writes it, from the first chapter to the last.

Things to consider when discussing a ghostwriting commission:

The project could be any number of different things from a manuscript which needs to be totally rewritten, updated, and reorganised to an idea for a book based on a person's experiences, thoughts, recollections, or vision.

- Credentials - Your CV including any books or other texts that you have written.
- Compatibility – the commissioner should feel comfortable talking to you and you must be confident in his/her ability to communicate the key points and provide you with enough information to enable you to write a publishable text.
- Understanding - ask questions until you clearly understand what the commissioner expects of you and what you can expect from them. Don't make assumptions, ask.
- Trust – the commissioner will need to trust the ghostwriter. For example if the commissioner is a business, they may be giving you access to commercially sensitive material. If it is a person telling a life story they will be giving you access to personal details which may be painful. They need to know they can trust you.
- Be sure to ask for a written brief. The brief should set out the time frame, costs, specific expectations on both sides, the actual work to be done – writing, research, editing and so on. If you are working for a publisher they will usually have a specific brief that clearly outlines the project and how long the project should take. If you are working for an individual it may be harder to get a proper brief from him or her.
- The plan for writing the text and the costs associated with it will depend on how much work the commissioner has already done in terms of research and/or writing and how much additional information is needed to complete the book.
- If the process to be conducted by taped interviews, don't underestimate the time taken in transcribing, it can be three to five times as long as the recorded tapes.
- Don't forget to include travel and other incidental expenses, such as obtaining permissions, illustrations and photographs. However, it could be better to ask that these be obtained by the commissioner.



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- Try to negotiate a price that covers the project in stages – that is that payment will be made in agreed instalments. This avoids problems if the commissioner decides to pull the plug on a commission. I suggest 25% before starting, 25% at fifty percent completion, 25% at seventy-five percent and 25% when it has been completed. Publishers may want to pay a flat fee or a combination of a fee and royalties. Before agreeing to this, make sure the book has the potential to make reasonable sales.
- It is not a good idea to undertake a ghostwriting commission on a share of royalties with the commissioner. While they may think the book is going to be a best seller, their assumptions are not often right.
- Ask for a contract or provide one yourself. Make suggestions if the contract seems weighted too much in favour of the commissioner. Ensure there is provision for disputes and a termination clause that has provision for covering your costs. (See the NZSA sample contract).

What to charge

There are three suggested methods for charging for the work:

Flat Fee – The ghostwriter works out how long the project will take, including research, fact-checking, re-writing etc, and quotes a flat fee. This is the preferred method provided there is a brief with clear outlines of what is to be delivered. Make sure you caution the commissioner that any changes to the brief will incur extra charges and write it into the contract or agreement. The one-off fee gives the commissioner a figure to work with and keeps the writer focused on the job. If you are a fast writer then the speed with which you complete the project will give you a higher hourly return.

Hourly rate – Where the ghostwriter charges by the hour (between \$25 and \$55). This may work for smaller projects.

Cents per word – Where the ghostwriter charges Xn cents per word of the final draft. Fees for ghostwriting services can range from 5 to 10 cents per word to 60 cents or more per word. However 10c to 15c would be about average.

Using a word count has one potential downfall and that is if you have written a manuscript of 100,000 words and the commissioner wants it cut down to 70,000 in order to make it more saleable you would only be paid for the 70,000 and would have to revise the manuscript to cut it down to the required length. The trick would be to set the per word fee high enough to cover the estimated time. Don't undervalue your skill and expertise.

Commissioners should be prepared to pay for what they want. Ghostwriting is not about the commissioner making money out of the work, it is about the writer earning a living at what they do, which is writing.

According to our research a book of about 75,000 words, or about 240 published pages could cost:

- \$5,000 very low
- \$15,000 low
- \$25,000 mid-range
- \$50,000 or more, high

The price depends on the person being written about, for example a well-known sports or celebrity could pay more than a little known adventurer with a great story to tell.

The 'as told to...' writing of the story of a celebrity or sports personality should command a fee of \$15,000 to \$30,000 for writing the project. Research would be extra and you should be able to charge around \$25 to \$55 and hour (\$40 is the mid range) depending on your credentials.

Writing for an individual who wants to tell their life story and who will probably self-publish could range from \$5,000 to \$15,000.



Writing an illustrated corporate history of a major company should give you credit as the author and command a fee of around \$25,000 to \$80,000. It could be more depending on the length of time taken researching and writing. Some have gone as high as \$100,000.

Corporate histories or commemorative books on a smaller scale could cost in the region of \$15,000 to \$20,000. This would provide for a corporate history including research, on-site interviews and visits.

Small family histories could range from \$5000 to \$10,000 depending on the research, number of interviews and words required.

Managing the Commissioner/Ghostwriter relationship

The relationship you have with the commissioner can be all business or it can be more relaxed depending on who it is with. However, it is important to keep the relationship on a businesslike footing. It pays not to get wrapped up in the subject's issues especially if the material is either traumatic or controversial. At some point you may want to query the subject on some of the material especially if it could be hurtful to others, or could lead to a libel suit being brought against them.

In the corporate situation the initial discussion will usually be about working out an outline, chapter headings, illustrations, references, important milestones for the company or organisation and so on.

If it is with a person the process will likely begin with an in-depth interview preferably face-to-face and in a place that is comfortable for the commissioner or subject to speak freely. This process allows you build rapport with the person you will be writing about and to get a feel for their character and personality.

With both situations you will work out a detailed plan, a schedule of interviews, when and how you can have access to materials, and the process for fact checking.

Everything that is not someone's opinion, that is information which is stated as a fact, needs to be checked for accuracy. Information such as days, dates, events and so on can be checked through media archives, the Internet and other sources. However it is assertions made by the commissioner as to people's motivations and behaviour being facts that need to be qualified or remain as an opinion.

The process of writing the text

Sometimes the project is just a matter of reorganising something the commissioner has already started but has been unable to finish. Giving it a structure and then knocking it into a publishable shape.

The outline establishes a working document and enables you to sketch out the basic information into the right sequence and get the commissioner's agreement that you've got it right. You can also use the outline to prompt the subject to give you more information to flesh out those chapters that need more information.

In addition to interviews, you will probably use email correspondence and phone calls to clarify points and seek further information and provide drafts of the text for checking by the commissioner.

For example a typical week might include:

- A 45-60 minute interview or other research
- Writing 3,000 to 10,000 words
- Making minor changes to text previously sent to the commissioner for checking

Who gets their name on the cover?

It is a good idea to sort out whose name will be on the cover of the book at the beginning. The commissioner will most likely want to have their name only. This makes sense if the commissioner is a major sports person or



celebrity and the ghostwriter is relatively unknown. However, if the ghostwriter is well-known then they may share the billing. It really comes down to whose name is going to sell the book. Cover billing can be handled in two ways:

Joe Commissioner with Jane Writer or Joe Commissioner as told to Jane Writer.

If the commissioner insists on having their name only on the cover then they should acknowledge your contribution inside. My suggestion is to include a line on the copyright pages saying something like "Writing assistance provided by Jane Writer."

It is unlikely the Commissioner will thank the ghostwriter on the acknowledgement page unless the ghostwriter has gone above and beyond the call of duty.

The bottom line is, it's their story and you are just helping them get it into a publishable form.

The issue of copyright

Under New Zealand Copyright law, the copyright in the work is owned by the writer unless there is a contract which states otherwise.

The commissioner is likely to want the ghostwriter to assign copyright in the work to them. If the contract assigns the copyright to the Commissioner then the contract should contain some protection for the writer.

In terms of the contract I suggest that the clause state that the copyright in the work does not pass to the commissioner until full payment is made. This ensures you get paid for it upfront.

Warranties and indemnities

It might be a good idea to have a clause in the contract stating that the commissioner indemnifies the ghostwriter against all actions, suits, proceedings, claims demands and costs incurred should a claim be lodged alleging that the text is a violation of any duty of confidence, or duty in respect of privacy, or any other right of any person or party whatsoever, and it contains nothing which to the knowledge of the commissioner is defamatory or in any other way unlawful, that all statements contained therein purporting to be facts are true and that any recipe, formula or instruction contained in the text will not, if followed accurately, cause any injury, illness or damage as a result. If there is something controversial in the book this can save you a problem later on should someone decide to take the commissioner to court.

Of course the commissioner may wish the ghostwriter to give a similar warranty for any material they have researched and contributed.

The *Da Vinci Code* case highlights that it is one thing to do research and quite another to 'lift' material and use it and that it is possible that someone out there will read the commissioner's book and say – "Hey, wait a minute, that's taken from my book!"

Further reading: *Ghostwriting: Other Ideas, Other Voices* by Joyce Faulkner
<http://www.fwointl.com/artman/exec/view.cgi?archive=14&num=503>