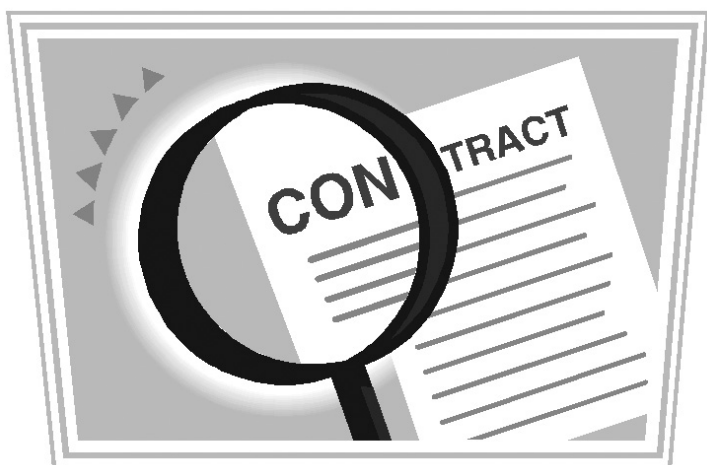




# The Art and Science of Writing a Book About Oracle

By Chris Lawson

**A** glance at the bookshelves of any large bookstore reveals an interesting fact there are more and more Oracle books being written today, from a growing number of publishers. The number of new titles has exploded just in the last few years — almost as fast as Oracle releases new database versions!



This huge expansion of new titles also means that there are lots of opportunities for new Oracle writers. After all, these books are selling because there really is a big demand for good books that explain how to best use Oracle. These books cover a wide range of topics for developers, DBAs, designers, and managers.

To exploit these opportunities, however, some preparation is required. The question for us, then, is how can we get started? Furthermore, what is involved in writing a technical book? Will it make me rich? Can I do it in my spare time?

## Will My Oracle Book Make Me Rich?

In this article we explore one author's experience in writing a technical book about Oracle. We will cover the following issues:

- How much time is required?
- How difficult is it really?
- How do I gain credibility?
- Where do I start?
- How does the editing process work?
- Is it all worth the effort?

For Oracle DBAs, designers or developers interested in writing a book about databases, I believe you will find my experience useful. Perhaps this information will save you some time, or alleviate some concerns. Of course, I do not claim to be an expert on publishing books, but I think my experience could be useful to you if you are considering writing a technical book.

## How Much Time Is Required?

I have always enjoyed performance tuning and other database “mysteries” and I wanted to show the novice performance tuner how to get started. I wanted to write a book more for the beginner, as opposed to the very sophisticated books really intended just for the “guru.” I wondered, however, how much time would be required. Could I keep up with tough editing deadlines? Would I fall behind?

Fortunately, I knew someone who was able to help me get started. Don Burleson, editor of *Oracle Internals* and author of numerous Oracle books, was kind enough to offer some suggestions. Don estimated that a first book would require an investment of 360 hours. He was very accurate. Here is the breakdown of my actual time spent writing and editing the book.

- 240 hours for the first draft
- 130 hours for the first set of edits
- 15 hours for answering questions during the second edits

You can see that my total time investment was 385 hours during a six-month period. This means that I spent about 15 hours each week just working on the book.

## How Difficult Is It, Really?

If you were to just look at the number of hours required, you might get the impression that the whole job is really pretty simple. Just 15 hours a week, how tough can that be?

Nevertheless, if you begin a book-writing project with the idea that it is going to be easy, you will be sadly mistaken. “Only” 15 hours per week is a very tough 15 hours. I discovered, for instance, that writing a book is far more difficult than writing technical papers.

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## Writing Can Be a Very Tedious Activity

Why is writing a book so difficult? I think there are two main reasons: *scope* and *accuracy*. Let's take a look at these two points.

When writing a book, the scope of the effort is much broader than simply writing a single technical article. For a single article, you can become the subject matter expert without spending an enormous amount of effort. Now, compare that to writing the equivalent of 20 technical papers! That roughly gives you an idea of the work involved.

The second major issue is *accuracy*. The book I wrote was about 400 pages, which is not really very large for a technical book. Nevertheless, for each of the 14 chapters, I needed to be technically accurate, clear, and up to date. For example, every script you reference needs to be correct – in logic as well as syntax.

In addition, you must be careful to present information that is *up to date*. In the Oracle world of fast database releases, techniques and ideas that are technically accurate in one database release may be outdated in the next. I discovered that some processes and techniques that I used had become obsolete with Oracle 9i. For instance, my method of gathering statistics using the *Analyze* command is really on the way out. Thus, I found it necessary to research and document the newer method suggested by Oracle. There were other techniques that I had to research as well.

## How Can I Gain Credibility?

Assuming that you haven't been scared off by now, the next question is: How can I find a publisher? Why would anyone listen to me?

Remember the saying from the English man of letters, Dr. Johnson: "Nobody except a blockhead ever wrote, except for money." This is true for publishers as well as writers. Publishing houses are not in the business of printing books for charity; they want to maximize the chances of success. That means either using an established author or using someone who has otherwise proven his or her writing ability. In other words, the publisher wants someone with *credibility*.

Clearly, publishers are interested in selling lots of copies of the books they publish. They can more easily do this if they sign-up an author who is already well known or at least has some impressive credentials. These well-known authors are oftentimes the speakers you see at the large national Oracle conferences; they draw a huge crowd every time they speak. Think of some of the big names at the Oracle conferences. Many times, their sessions are completely sold-out. Obviously, these folk will have a much easier time finding a technical publisher.

Since most of us aren't turning away crowds at conventions, we need another way. Probably the easiest way to enhance your credibility is to *write articles for technical journals*. Besides the local user groups, there are numerous technical journals that are happy to review submissions – even from unknown writers. The best way to start is to begin with the smaller, local journals, and then work your way up to the larger publications.

Many popular Oracle authors have used this strategy. For instance, Don Burleson, author of more Oracle books than anyone, advertises that he has penned more than 100 articles! In contrast, why would a publisher listen seriously to someone who has not bothered to publish even a single technical article?

## Where Do I Start?

Before your book project can start, the publisher will want to see a detailed proposal for your book idea. This proposal should include an analysis of the market for your book, the anticipated competition, plus detailed chapter outlines.

I wrote the original proposal for *The Art and Science of Oracle Performance Tuning* in December of 2001. Although very supportive, the first publisher I contacted, O'Reilly, already had contracted for a book on a similar topic. Naturally, they did not want to compete with their own book.

The second publisher I contacted, Curlingstone, a subsidiary of WROX, was interested in reviewing the proposal. I e-mailed the book proposal to Curlingstone and they hired a small group of highly respected DBAs to review my proposal. At the time, I didn't know that Curlingstone had signed-up a renowned team of reviewers. Since many weeks had elapsed since I submitted the proposal, I mistakenly assumed they were not interested!

## The Contract

If your proposal fits the needs of the publisher (and you have sufficient credibility) they will offer you a contract. They will possibly want you to consider certain changes, based on the comments from the reviewers. For instance, they might want you to target a certain group of readers or slightly change the focus of the book.

## The Contract Is Really Not Very Complicated

If you think that you will get rich from your book royalties, think again. As a first-time author, you will be given a small advance, which is typically a few thousand dollars, and a minor percentage of the net sales. Your advance will probably be spread-out across several months and paid upon completing certain chapters. As part of your compensation, you will also given a handful of free copies.

In return for your advance, you will be obligated to deliver chapters according to an agreed-upon schedule. You can simply e-mail the chapters to the editor using a standard word processing format, typically Microsoft Word.

## How Does the Editing Process Work?

Once you have completed your draft of the entire book, you will enter the editing phase, in which you work with one or more editors and a review team setup by the publisher. I found the editors a very reasonable and professional group of people. They did not claim to be super DBAs, but they were certainly very competent writers.

The publisher will hire a review team comprising software engineers who are well acquainted with the subject material. They will review each chapter and make suggestions on where the manuscript could be improved. You will then have to review their comments and make appropriate changes.

I found this stage to be very trying and much harder than I thought. Every paragraph of every page in your book will be subjected to intense scrutiny by a group of people you probably don't even know. Although my reviewers were well qualified, I found it to be no fun to have my writing subjected to such a rigorous critique.

## Be Prepared for a Thorough Critique – Painful But Necessary!

Of course, the final product will certainly be much better because of this review but that doesn't make it any more fun! A football player may become a better athlete by "running the gauntlet," but he probably doesn't look forward to it.

The reviewers will be of varying skill levels and backgrounds. At times, they may become confused or you may believe that their comments are completely wrong. For instance, the main technical editor suggested that 50% of the OS-specific material should discuss *Windows*. He wanted to substantially trim down the Unix section and add much new material on *Windows*. My experience, however, has been that Unix is a much more important platform, so I argued against his suggestion. I ended up adding several pages on Windows, but not removing any of the Unix material.

At other times, the reviewers may contradict each other and you will have to use your own judgment. This happened to me several times. In one chapter, for instance, where I talked about indexing, here is what two reviewers said:

**Reviewer 1:** "Be sure to remind the readers to rebuild indexes regularly."

**Reviewer 2:** "There is no basis whatsoever for rebuilding indexes."

Once again, my theory was confirmed: If you get 10 DBAs in a room together, you will get 10 different "right" ways to do something.

I found the most helpful reviewer *suggestions* to be comments such as, "I don't understand what you're saying." This type of comment told me that I had not really communicated well. I almost always took action to modify a section whenever a reviewer made a comment like this.

Keep in mind that the reviewers' comments are mostly suggestions and observations based on their personal experience. Rarely are technical issues so black and white that there is really only one correct answer. Of course, you would be wise to seriously consider most remarks; by doing so, I learned quite a bit from the reviewers. Naturally, errors in syntax or usage should always be corrected.

After the first stage of edits, things move rapidly. I was surprised at how quickly the editors incorporated and reviewed all the changes. There were actually only a few remaining technical questions, plus some formatting difficulties. Did you ever notice, for example, exactly how the output is formatted in *Sql\*Plus* for *numbers* versus *text*? (The "justification" of the text is opposite.)

## Off to the Printers!

Once all the edits and reviewer questions have been addressed, there are just a few more minor issues to handle. You will have the opportunity to write/review a few preliminary sections, such as the *Introduction*, *Acknowledgements*, and *Dedication* sections. I found these to be very simple.

Finally, when you have answered all the editors' questions and the proof-readers have blessed the work, it will be sent to the printers. There's really little for you to do, except relax!

At this point, you will probably also receive another portion of your advance.

## Is It Worth the Effort?

Writing a technical book about Oracle databases is a formidable challenge. I found it to be one of the most difficult things I have ever done. Ironically, I could not have done it without the big "dot-com meltdown," which gave me a lot of free time. Without this extra time, I simply would not have been able to perform the necessary writing.

For me, the toughest part in writing *The Art and Science of Oracle Performance Tuning* was wading through the myriads of comments from the technical reviewers. Facing a huge amount of critical comments can really try your patience. There really isn't any other way, however. No one has all the answers; everyone makes lots of mistakes. This means that an extensive review process is necessary in order to build a good product.

Now that it's all over, I can look back and smile. I have learned a lot more about Oracle, and some of my erroneous ideas have been corrected. Now, I can look back and smile.



### About the Author

**Chris Lawson** is a DBA consultant and author of *The Art and Science of Oracle Performance Tuning* (Curlingstone). He specializes in performance tuning of data warehousing and financial applications. Chris is also the editor of the online magazine, *The Oracle Magician*, available at [www.OracleMagician.com](http://www.OracleMagician.com), and also runs the **Oracle Magician Bookshop**. Chris and his family live in Dublin, California.