

My Own Correspondence with Steve Manning, and My Review of His “Write a Book in Fourteen Days” Course

By Holly Lisle

The following are the e-mails I received from Steve Manning, and my responses. I am posting them, because these e-mails led to Mr. Manning sending me a free copy of his Write a Book in Fourteen Days course to evaluate. My review of the course is posted at the bottom of this page.

From: steve@writeabooknow.com

Date: Sun Dec 21, 2003 6:47:21 PM US/Eastern

To: [withheld] @hollylisle.com

Subject: www.HollyLisle.com – Site Response

Mail send on 21 Dec 2003 – 17:47:21 CST

*By CPE00105aa42502-CM0f1119822610.cpe.net.cable.rogers.com
(24.100.161.60)*

Using: Windows 98 – Internet Explorer 6

Hi Holly!

Thank you, thank you, thank you. It sounds stupid, but your vigilance is very important to me. I read that ‘BJ’ did not get her refund from me. I have corrected that. BJ received the refund in early December. As I said in the email I sent to her, I have plenty of reasons, but no excuses. Should anyone else contact you saying they did not get their refund, please insist that they contact me at steve@writeabooknow.com Their refund will be processed immediately.

Cheers,

Steve Manning

*From: Holly Lisle <[withheld] @hollylisle.com>
Date: Mon Dec 22, 2003 5:50:19 AM US/Eastern
To: steve@writeabooknow.com
Subject: Re: www.HollyLisle.com – Site Response*

Dear Steve,

She sent me the news that she got her refund, which I also posted. I also posted the positive notes from the guy who liked what he got in your package.

I don't believe the claims your advertising makes about your product, but my attempt, since people kept asking about your program, is to simply present what people tell me about their experiences with it. Both sides.

*All best,
Holly Lisle*

*From: <address withheld (Manning's private e-mail address)>
Date: Mon Dec 22, 2003 8:24:14 AM US/Eastern
To: Holly Lisle
Subject: Re: Re: www.HollyLisle.com – Site Response*

Hi Holly!

Thank you so much for your prompt reply. If you'll send along your mailing address, I'll send you a complimentary copy of my product. You can review it, or at least have it on hand should you like to review it in future.

*Cheers,
Steve Manning*

*From: Holly Lisle <withheld>
Date: Mon Dec 22, 2003 8:46:15 AM US/Eastern
To: <private e-mail withheld>
Subject: Re: www.HollyLisle.com – Site Response*

Dear Steve,

Since I didn't pull any punches reviewing your advertising, it would be unfair of me to not look at the product. However, I'm not your target demographic – I've sold 25 novels to major publishers and my review of a product that claims to be able to allow anyone, no matter what their writing level, get an agent and sell a book is going to be severely hampered by the fact that I'm not starting out with writing burdened by barely comprehensible sentence structure, complete absence of any idea of what makes a story interesting, and all the other horrific flaws that I see in most beginning writers. Even if I got some great pointers from the program, my review would be that of a professional building on already-present skills, and not of a beginner with no clue of where to begin. My review would note the fact that I'd consider my experience with the program atypical.

I'd also be reviewing it strictly for its value to novelists – novels are my area of experience, and would-be novelists make up the bulk of non-fan e-mails that I receive. I'm not qualified to evaluate its worth for writers of non-fiction.

If, keeping those two points in mind, you'd still like to send me a copy, I'll review it to the best of my ability.

*All best,
Holly Lisle*

My Review of:

How to Write a Book on Anything in Fourteen Days or Less ... Guaranteed: An Expert's Guide

Is the course a scam? Well, the course does not deliver what the web site would lead you to believe it will deliver (a publishable book in fourteen days), but if you send off your money, you will receive in the mail a course that is in fact about writing and does purport to teach you how to write a book in fourteen days. Whether you get your money's worth is something I cannot decide for you. And according to most of the folks who write to me, Manning honors his money-back guarantee. So while I wouldn't call this course a risk-free investment, I would, based on admittedly limited data, classify it as relatively low-risk, if you can afford to have that amount of money tied up for about a year.

Please understand, though, that this course does not intend to teach you to write a **publishable** book. Not in fourteen days. Not ever. At the very back of the manual, Manning writes:

*"The primary purpose of this book is to teach one how to write in the easiest and most effective way possible, and in the shortest amount of time. **It has never been the purpose of the authors to teach others how to get published.**" (emphasis mine – HL)*

But the lure of agents and publishers jumping on your just-completed manuscript is one of the real hard-sells on the writeabook site. I personally think this we-don't-intend-to-teach-you-to-write-something-salable information should be on the front page of Manning's web site and at the very front of the course. Because I suspect that when most people shell out

several hundred bucks on a book-writing course, they want to learn how to write books they can sell.

That is not what this course is about. Furthermore, this course WILL NOT teach you how to write a publishable book, and if you follow Mannings instructions exactly, you will write an UNpublishable book.

Does the course deliver on what it says in the small print that it's about? Can you write **any** book in fourteen days if you follow the instructions in the course?

To misquote an impeached ex-president ... define "write a book."

My definition of writing a book is doing everything that it takes to create a completed manuscript, from start to finish, in the time allotted. By that definition, no, you will not write your book in fourteen days using Manning's method.

Manning's definition of writing a book is "create a rough, unedited first draft." It does not include the outlining and backgrounding time, which is significant – you'll spend easily as long at the book prep as in writing the first draft, and perhaps longer. Nor does the allotted fourteen days include any form of editing. (Manning's suggested form of editing, by the way, will not help you make your manuscript publishable, or anything close.) By Manning's definition, though, if you follow Manning's guidelines, can you write a book in fourteen days? Sometimes. Depends on the length of the book, your determination to stick with it, and the amount of time you have available. It isn't impossible. But then, I know that writing a **whole, publishable** novel from start to finish including revision and preliminary work in fourteen days isn't impossible, either. It's simply very difficult.

How long will it take for you to go from nothing on paper to finished manuscript if you use Manning's method precisely? A minimum of about a month. Significantly longer in a lot of cases.

And what do I think of Manning's course?

His methods don't work for me. I followed his "writing machine" technique exactly as he presented it. It actually slowed down and disrupted my writing. And the method wouldn't work for **any** novelist who is already able to write in flow – who is, in other words, able to sit down at computer or typewriter or pad of paper paper and lose himself in the story for an hour or several hours. Currently, writing in flow, I am comfortably producing 3000-4000 words (fifteen to twenty typed, formatted pages) of close-to-finished first draft text in a couple of hours. Using Manning's method, a timer went off every five minutes, shattering my flow and ending my work on that section of the story. Working by this method also completely eliminated spontaneous alterations of outlines to pursue different paths, something that after more than twenty published novels (my current bibliography is here), I've discovered is essential to my creation of the best possible book.

Manning requires rigid and unthinking adherence to an outline. He is utterly derisive of the novel-writing process as most successful novelists experience it. He states:

"There are those authors who will tell you that the book just wrote itself. (Also known as "writing in flow" – HL) If this were the case, then what these folks should do is simply put a ream of paper on the kitchen table, with a couple of pens, and then go on vacation for a couple of weeks. When they return, not only will the elves have made new shoes for them and the members of their family, but the manuscript will also have been written.

He also says:

"There are others who will say that the characters wrote the book. They took over the whole process of writing. Frankly, I think these people have bigger problems than I can help them

with."

The fact is, whether Manning chooses to acknowledge it or not, writing in flow is not some mythical Holy Grail of Writing, but the way many – if not most – full-time professional novelists work. And having characters “come alive” and take over sections of the story, if not the whole process, is very much a part of that process. Though his attempt at psychoanalysis is, you must admit, interesting.

Manning’s attitude in regard to fiction written by any other method than the one he presents is pervasive throughout the course.

Are Manning’s methods entirely worthless? Probably not. Just as no single pair of shoes will fit every pair of feet, **no single method of writing will produce books for every writer.** Some writers out there may find the methods in this course useful. I think very few who use this method to write fiction will produce anything salable with it. I suspect it may be marginally more useful for writers of non-fiction, but I am not in a position to state that as a fact. I’m not a professional non-fiction writer.

Is there anything good in Manning’s course? Yes. Some of the advice Manning offers is good advice. He sounds like a genuinely nice person, too, and is enthusiastic about the subject he’s presenting. I found him an engaging speaker, if a bit breathless – sort of “Tony Robbins on speed.” On the other hand, some of his advice is bad advice. And some of what he presents as absolute fact is absolutely wrong. Unless you’re already writing books for a living, you’re going to have a hard time telling which is which, because no matter whether he’s presenting the good stuff, the bad stuff, or the wrong stuff, he’s warm and friendly and engaging.

This course contains critical factual errors regarding manuscript production and manuscript editing. If you follow

Manning's instructions to the letter, you will produce a manuscript that fails to conform to professional industry standards, and commercial publishers and agents will bounce your book out the door unread. So if you buy the course, you are still going to have to read the guidelines for any publishers or agents to whom you hope to submit your work, plus a couple of good books by people who write novels for a living.

Finally, let me present what I consider the most representative couple of passages in the course. In a section titled **How to become the world's foremost authority on any topic!**, Manning writes:

"Now I want to show you how you can easily become the world's foremost authority on a subject, even if you're starting from ground zero, or a limited amount of your own information."

You are to go out and select the single most recent title on your chosen topic of would-be expertise written by each of the ten people **you** consider the top ten experts in the field (*Remembering, please, that you don't know much of anything about this field, and so are not qualified to judge who knows what he's talking about and who is full of hot air – you're going to choose these books by which ones sold the best, I guess – HL*).

You are to read all ten of these books, making notes only on the parts of these works that are new material to you, skimming past those you already know. (*It is my experience that it is in the area of things that you **think** you know that you will make your most stunning mistakes, and this is, in fact, where Manning fell afoul of his own process in creating this course.*)

In any case, once you have done this, he says:

*“Once you’ve studied this information, digested it and have it at your fingertips, **you’re the 11th leading authority in the field.** Now it’s time to become #1. Take a look at what has already been written and simplify it.” (Boldface mine – HL ... I’m all jazzed to take a week off from writing to become the world’s foremost authority on quantum physics and superstring theory. How about you?)*

By doing so, he suggests – by simplifying ten recent books by ten experts in the field as identified by you, who don’t know the field – you have made **yourself** the world’s **number one authority** on your chosen topic. He also suggests you cobble together a couple of acronyms for various steps of whatever process you’ve just become a self-proclaimed expert on and call these acronyms a technology, so that you can claim to be the sole originator of this unique technology, which is in fact a repackaging of what other people are doing already.

In the *Write a Book in Fourteen Days* course, it is quite evident that Manning followed his own advice every step of the way, and that he bases his own credentials as a writing expert on the above approach.

He believes in it, and every page of the manual and every hour of his lectures is permeated with this philosophy and its results.

If you like this advice and you would feel comfortable becoming an expert by this method, nothing else in the course will bother you, and you’ll probably consider your money well spent.

If you see flaws in this method, do not buy the course.

Could I recommend the course to anyone? No. But then, no single pair of shoes will fit every pair of feet. Only you can know whether Manning's shoes were designed for you.

My final say on the matter: **You'll find my opinion of experts vs. working professionals here.** In spite of the fact that the article topic is college education for writers, the discussion of experts vs. professionals is completely relevant to this review as well. The difference is that colleges claim that having a degree makes you an expert, and Manning claims that having written a book about a subject makes you an expert. Neither considers actual work experience relevant.

Having done a pretty thorough job of ripping a guy a new one for creating a crap class using incredibly stupid methods, **let me now put my money where my mouth is.**

I offer a comprehensive introductory writing class based on my fiction-writing and publishing experience. It's called How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't SUCK, and it is no-strings-attached FREE, including a private classroom, downloadable lessons, and a friendly, well-moderated forum where you can work with other students. I hope you'll try it out.

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