

Publishing 101: How to Self-Publish Well

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Self-publishing offers wonderful opportunities to writers who are willing to invest time, money, and effort to produce a quality book. To do it properly requires a leap of faith and the willingness to accept some risk. The good news is you don't have to (and shouldn't!) go through the process alone. Self-publishing well requires:

- An entrepreneurial mindset
- An adequate budget
- The ability to be comfortable with risk
- Accepting that not everyone will like your book
- The willingness to consistently promote yourself and your writing

Understanding the self-publishing process—including how to find and work with great self-publishing service providers—will save you thousands of dollars and lots of frustration.

3 ways to publish a book

1. **Traditional Publishing:** The publishing company buys the book rights from author, so it owns the book. The publisher pays book production/distribution/marketing costs and the author gets about 10% of the royalties.
2. **Self-Publishing:** The author owns the book and pays all production/distribution/marketing costs. The author shares royalties with retailers like Amazon for POD distribution and with wholesalers/distributors for expanded distribution, but does not share royalties with the self-publishing company or service providers.
3. **Hybrid or Partner Publishing:** The author owns the book and pays some or all costs to produce it. In return for assistance with marketing/distribution, the hybrid publisher takes a percentage of the royalties.

3 ways to self-publish a book

1. **Do it yourself** – You'll need help, so the DIY method is not recommended. It's a huge amount of work, has a significant learning curve, and does not yield good results (unless you happen to be an editor and book designer). If you're a novice, there are many, many ways to go wrong.
2. **Full-service self-publishing company** – Can give good results and removes some of the project management burden, but *be very careful*. Do your due diligence before hiring: vet the company thoroughly, read and understand the entire publishing contract, and talk to previous clients.
3. **A la carte** – Can give good results if you work with professional service providers, but still has a big learning curve. Requires knowing the entire process, having the ability to find and work with good service providers, and the investment of significant project management time and effort from you.

A Fourth Option– Use the a la carte method *after* hiring a project manager to oversee the book production process for you. Your PM will choose and work with editors, designers, proofreaders, printers, distribution experts, and other service providers to ensure you publish a top-quality book.

3 most important questions to ask yourself before you self-publish

Your answers will determine your entire publishing process, including which self-publishing method is best for you, how long the process will take, and whether you should hire marketing help.

1. **Why are you publishing the book?** For example, if you want to put your book on the market, plan to invest more money in editing/design than if you're writing a family history you don't plan to sell.

2. **What are your goals for the book?** For example, if you're a professional and you want to self-publish a book to give you credibility and market yourself or your company, you'll need to invest in top-notch editing and design and have a solid marketing plan for your book.
3. **How much money can you afford to invest in the book?** To self-publish well, you'll need professional editors, designers, and proofreaders, plus a solid distribution and marketing plan. If you want to publish a print book, you'll need to factor in printing costs. When you add up the costs for all the services, it could cost well over \$5,000 to produce and distribute a quality print book. If you're on a tight budget, consider starting with an ebook; even better, postpone the self-publishing process until you can save the money needed for professional editing, design, distribution, and marketing.

The publishing process

Writing → Manuscript review → Developmental editing → Copy editing → Book production [manuscript formatting, cover design, interior layout, ebook formatting] → Proofreading → Printing → Distribution

Top 3 self-publishing priorities

After you finish writing, your priorities should be: editing/proofreading, design, and marketing.

10 steps to publishing a well-written, well-edited, well-designed book

1. **Writing the manuscript** – Consider hiring a writing coach rather than trying to figure it out on your own; working with a professional writing coach will eliminate the need for Step 2. Make sure your manuscript is a Microsoft Word document with 12-point Times New Roman font and double-spaced lines.
2. **Manuscript review / full developmental edit** – Optional, but highly recommended if you didn't work with a writing coach when composing your manuscript. In a manuscript evaluation, a professional developmental editor reads your manuscript and creates a report showing strengths and areas to be improved, then recommends revisions to be made before publishing. The author can make the revisions unassisted, but it's best to hire the editor to do a full developmental edit—in which case, the editor helps the author make the revisions and improve the manuscript. A worthy investment.
3. **Copy editing** – Don't skip this step. Copy editing is important because it corrects errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure, and ensures style guide compliance. All books being put on the market should have at least one round of copy editing from a professional copy editor.
4. **Manuscript formatting** – Self-publishing companies / freelance designers may require you to format your MS Word manuscript before submitting it for design. Manuscript formatting is not the same thing as laying out the interior (step #6 below); formatting prepares the manuscript for the interior design process. For novels or other books with straight running text, little or no formatting is needed. For a complex manuscript or any book with lots of images, charts, sidebars, and footnotes (many nonfiction fall into this category), consider hiring a formatter.
5. **Cover design** – Your book's cover is your best marketing tool. Don't try to design it yourself unless you are a designer and you know all the elements of book cover design. Hire a professional freelance cover designer or work with a reputable self-publishing company, because readers will judge your book by its cover. A well-designed self-published book is indistinguishable from a book published by a traditional publisher, and you need a professional designer for this. Your cover should have compelling imagery and easy-to-read text to entice readers to explore further. It should look appealing at a variety of sizes, from full size to small thumbnails used in online retail listings. Use a professional designer if your budget permits, or check out 99designs.com if your budget is tight.

6. **Interior layout** – Hire a professional book designer or work with a reputable self-publishing company to design your book’s interior. Laying out the interior of a print book is a complex process and there is a steep learning curve. A word processing program like Microsoft Word is *not* the right tool for the job. Proper interior layout requires using Adobe InDesign or similar design software.
7. **Ebook formatting** – Ebook formatting is a completely different process than designing a print book and requires skill to do well. Ebook conversion has a learning curve and usually requires knowledge of HTML. It’s best to hire a professional ebook formatter, especially if your book has a complex layout and/or lots of images, text boxes, sidebars, etc.
8. **Proofreading** – Proofreading is critically important to the quality of your book because it is the last opportunity to correct design and content errors before publication. If you’re not working with a self-publishing company that provides this service, hire a professional proofreader.
9. **Printing** – Print on Demand (POD) works well for small quantities of books; digital/offset printing is best for larger quantities. Hardcover books and books with color interiors are expensive to print and require you to artificially inflate your retail price to compensate, which can result in fewer sales.
10. **Distribution** –POD direct distribution is easy and budget friendly, and is the best choice for most authors. Distribute your book via through Amazon CreateSpace, Amazon Kindle, and IngramSpark to maximize your market reach. Traditional/ expanded distribution may increase the possibility of book being carried in bookstores and libraries but is more complicated and expensive than POD because it involves distributors, wholesalers, and printing a quantity of books to be stored in a warehouse.

Book Marketing

Book marketing, publicity, author branding, and building an author platform are important and complex endeavors. There are entire books written and courses offered on this one aspect of publishing. Consider hiring marketing/publicity/branding help, if your budget permits. Some general advice:

- Start early—preferably before you begin the publishing process.
- You will have to do some of the marketing work yourself, even if you hire help—it’s an unavoidable part of being an author.
- An author website is very important—it doesn’t have to be elaborate but it should look professional.
- Blogging and social media can be helpful, but you should have a strategy and be consistent in your posting. These tasks are not a substitute for a quality author website.
- Consider traditional PR tactics like press releases, media kits, and radio/TV interviews.

Top Tips: My Best Self-Publishing Advice

1. **Work with a project manager + professional freelance publishing service providers (editors, designers, ebook formatters, printing companies, book marketers, etc.) or a reputable self-publishing company.** DIY books look DIY—readers are savvy and can tell when a book wasn’t published properly. No matter how brilliant your writing, your book sales and author credibility will suffer if you publish a book that looks amateurish or is full of errors. If necessary, postpone publishing the book; save your money until you can afford to hire a self-publishing company or professional freelancers.
2. **Don’t spend money you can’t afford to lose.** Think of your self-publishing budget as “Vegas money”—you set it aside and hope to make a profit, but you won’t experience financial hardship if your book doesn’t sell. When planning your publishing budget, make sure your sales expectations are realistic.

3. **Understand that not everyone will like your book.** Publish the best book you can and be optimistic, but be prepared for at least a few negative reviews. It's all part of being a published author. Resist the urge to argue with people who give your book bad reviews online.
4. **Buy your own ISBNs, even if you're working with a reputable self-publishing company.** Buy your own so that you're the publisher of record. You'll need one ISBN for each of book format (hardcover, softcover, ebook, audiobook, etc.). Purchase a block of ten ISBNs at www.myidentifiers.com.
5. **Do not publish an unedited or improperly edited book.** Work with a writing coach or get a manuscript review and full developmental edit to improve your content. Hire a professional copy editor for at least one round of copy editing before your book's interior is designed. Hire a professional proofreader to do at least one round of proofreading after design.
6. **Get permission in writing to use images, illustrations, or anything you didn't write or create yourself.** For example, paying someone to illustrate your book does not necessarily mean you have the right to use the illustrations in your book; it must be clearly spelled out in the contract. If you have any doubt about using something without written permission, consult an attorney. Failure to obtain written permission to use things you don't own the rights to can result in legal problems.
7. **Consider publishing an ebook first** to test the market before investing in publishing a print book, especially if you're working with a small budget. Ebook publishing is quicker, cheaper, and easier than print publishing, and you can always go back and publish the print version later.
8. **Thoroughly read all service provider and self-publishing company contracts before signing.** Reputable service providers will make their contracts readily available to you. You must understand the service offerings, fee structure, printing costs, royalty policy, etc. before signing. Consult an attorney on anything not clear, especially if the contract is from a large self-publishing company.
9. **Get all of your book's original production/source files** from your self-publishing company or freelance designer after the work is complete. This is very important—check the contract to be sure it's stated clearly that you will be given the files when they're complete. You paid the company/freelancer to produce the files, so you should have them in your possession when the project ends.
10. **Start marketing early.** You will have to do some of the marketing work yourself, even if you hire help—it's an unavoidable part of self-publishing. A quality author website is very important.

Publishing Resources

- Kim Bookless, Publishing Consultant | Editor | Proofreader kimbookless.com
- Chicago Self-Publishing Group meetup.com/chicago-self-publishing
- The Cadence Group <http://www.thecadencegrp.com>
- Jill Welsh, Developmental Editor and Writing Coach www.jwelsheditorial.com
- Chicago Women in Publishing (CWIP) cwip.org
- Lawyers for the Creative Arts (LCA) law-arts.org
- Joel Friedlander's website thebookdesigner.com and Jane Friedman's website janefriedman.com

Kim Bookless is a publishing consultant, editor, and proofreader. She helps authors bring their books to life by guiding them through the self-publishing process, including editing, cover design, interior layout, ebook conversion, printing, and distribution. She serves as their publishing advisor and advocate while providing copy editing, proofreading, and project management services. She is the founder of the [Chicago Self-Publishing Group](http://chicago-self-publishing.com) and former president of [Chicago Women in Publishing](http://chicago-women-in-publishing.com).