

Self-Publishing: How To Do It Well

Kim Bookless — October 2015

Self-publishing offers wonderful opportunities to writers who are willing to invest time, money, and effort in producing a quality book. However, publishing is always a risky endeavor, and few authors are able to make a big profit from their books. Self-publishing well requires an entrepreneurial mindset; a healthy budget; the ability to be comfortable with risk; accepting that not everyone will like your book; and learning how to promote yourself and your writing. Knowing how self-publishing works—including how to find and work with great service providers—will save you thousands of dollars and lots of frustration.

Publishing Methods:

Publishing method	Who owns the book?	Who pays to produce the book?	Who gets the royalties?	Examples
Traditional Publishing	Publishing company	Publishing company	Shared by publishing company, literary agent, retailers, and author. Author percentage is very low.	Penguin Random House Simon & Schuster Sourcebooks
Self-Publishing	Author	Author	Author keeps 100%. If selling from a retailer like Amazon, the retailer will take some of the royalties.	Mill City Press Adams Press
Hybrid or Partner Publishing	Author	Author	Shared by publishing company, retailers, and author. Author percentage varies.	She Writes Press

- **Traditional Publishing:** Publishing company owns the book. Publisher buys some or all book rights from author, covers all production/distribution/marketing costs, and takes 80% to 90% of royalties. Example: Simon & Schuster.
- **Self-Publishing:** Author owns the book and covers all production/distribution/marketing costs; the author assumes all the financial risk. Author usually does not share royalties with self-publishing company but will share with retailers. Example: Mill City Press.
- **Hybrid or Partner Publishing:** Author owns the book and pays to produce it. In return for assistance with marketing and distribution, the publishing company takes a small percentage of royalties. Example: She Writes Press.

Ask yourself these three questions before you self-publish. The answers will determine your entire publishing process, including which self-publishing method is best for you, how long the process will take, whether you should hire marketing help, and more.

1. Why are you publishing the book? (market my business; tell my life story to my kids, etc.)
2. What are your goals for it? (provide some income; use as a tool to obtain speaking gigs, etc.)
3. How much money can you afford to invest? (count on \$5000+ to publish properly)

Top Priorities: After you write your manuscript, focus on editing, design, and marketing.

Self-Publishing Methods:

1. **Do It Yourself** – You might save some money, but it's a lot of work, has a significant learning curve, and does not yield good results. If you're a novice, there are many ways to go wrong. If you can't afford to publish properly, save your money until you have an adequate budget.
2. **A la carte** – Can give good results if you're working with professional service providers but it still has a learning curve. It requires solid coordination skills and significant project management time and effort. You are the "general contractor" and must coordinate the efforts of your editors, designers, printers, ebook formatters, distribution channels, etc.
3. **Self-publishing company** – Can give great results and removes some of the project management burden but requires vetting to ensure it's a reputable company. Unless you're hiring a project manager, working with a self-publishing company will require your commitment and consistent attention and effort throughout the publishing process.

The Ideal Publishing Process:

Manuscript Review → Developmental Editing → Copyediting → Manuscript Formatting → Cover Design → Interior Layout → Proofreading → Book Printing and/or Ebook Formatting → Distribution

How to Self-Publish – For a well-written, well-edited, and well-designed book, follow these steps:

1. **Manuscript review and possible developmental editing** – These services are optional, but highly recommended. A manuscript review is relatively inexpensive, and I believe it is the single best thing you can do for your book. A developmental editor reads your manuscript and creates a report showing strengths and areas to be improved, then recommends revisions to be made before publishing. Often the author decides to hire the editor to do a full developmental edit and help implement the revisions.
2. **Copyediting** – Copyediting makes a huge difference in the book's quality because it corrects errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, etc. All manuscripts need at least one round of copyediting from a professional editor; two rounds will likely be needed if the book hasn't had a full developmental edit.
3. **Manuscript formatting** – Self-publishing companies and freelance designers may require you to format your manuscript before submitting it for design. For novels, which are straight running text, little or no formatting is needed. For a complex manuscript or any book with lots of images, charts, sidebars, footnotes, etc. (many nonfiction books fall into this category), consider hiring a formatter.
4. **Cover design** – Hire a professional cover designer—readers will judge your book by its cover. A well-designed self-published book is indistinguishable from a traditionally published book, and this level of quality requires an experienced design professional. Print books need front cover, back cover, and spine design; an ebook needs only the front cover.

5. **Interior layout** – There is a steep learning curve here, so hire a professional book designer. Laying out the interior of a print book is not easy to do in a word processing program like Microsoft Word or with templates because they're the wrong tools for the job. Proper book design requires using Adobe InDesign or similar software, and knowing what you're doing.
6. **Proofreading** – Proofreading is critically important to the quality of your book. It is the last opportunity to correct design and content errors before publication. Hire a professional proofreader, if possible; otherwise, plan to spend a lot of time reviewing the files yourself.
7. **Ebook formatting and distribution** – This has a learning curve and requires HTML. You need to publish two ebook file formats: MOBI for Kindle devices/apps and EPUB for all other e-reader devices/apps. Ebook design can sometimes be less complex than print design, but it requires skill to do well. Hire a professional formatter and use an ebook distribution service.
8. **Printing** – Prices vary by project and printing company. Print on Demand (POD) is fine if your book is simple (softcover with B&W interior), you want a small quantity, and you don't want to make a big investment in printing. For a large print run, or for books with complex structures and/or color interiors, consider using an offset printer. Hardcover books and books with color interiors are very expensive to print; either option could double or triple your print price. A higher print price would require you to increase your retail price in order to make a profit, which could hurt your sales.
9. **Distribution** – The lack of an established distribution system is one of self-publishing's biggest challenges, so use a distribution service. POD distribution is simple and inexpensive, but it limits you to selling online and in person. Expanded distribution can increase the *possibility* of your book being carried in bookstores and libraries, but there is no guarantee.
10. **Marketing** – This is important, so start early. An attractive author website should be your first priority. Book marketing is critically important but does not guarantee success. You must be willing and able to do the marketing work yourself—it's an unavoidable part of self-publishing. If you don't have a marketing background or an author platform, or if you struggle with self-promotion, consider hiring a book marketing consultant or agency. Services range from a short consultation to a full book publicity campaign, and fees vary accordingly. Be aware that publicists won't take on a book that's badly edited or designed.

Top Ten Tips: My Best Self-Publishing Advice

1. **Read *The Fine Print of Self-Publishing*** by Mark Levine. www.bookpublisherscompared.com.
2. **Don't spend money you can't afford to lose.** Think of your self-publishing budget as "Vegas money," meaning you hope to make a profit but you won't experience financial hardship if your book doesn't sell well. When planning your publishing budget, make sure your sales expectations are realistic and remember you'll be sharing royalties with online retailers.
3. **Understand that not everyone will like your book.** Publish the best book you can and be optimistic, but prepare yourself for the possibility of negative reviews. It's all part of being a published author. Professional editing and design help keep bad reviews to a minimum.

4. **Buy your own ISBNs** so you are the publisher of record. You'll need one ISBN for each format (print book, MOBI ebook, EPUB ebook, audiobook, etc.), so purchase a block of ten at www.myidentifiers.com. If you're not planning to sell your book, it's fine to use the self-publishing company's free ISBNs, which makes the company your publisher of record.
5. **Do not publish an unedited or under-edited book.** Putting out a bad book is a waste of time, effort, and money. Get a manuscript review by a professional developmental editor and make the recommended revisions; if your budget permits, hire the editor to do a full developmental edit to improve your manuscript. Hire a professional copyeditor to do at least one round of copyediting before you enter book production. Hire a professional proofreader to do one round of proofreading before you print or publish your book.
6. **Get permission in writing to use images, illustrations, or anything not created by you.** Paying someone to create take photos or create illustrations does not necessarily mean you can put them in/on your book; permission must be clearly stated. If there is any doubt about using something without written permission from the owner, consult an attorney.
7. **Hire professional service providers** (editors, designers, ebook formatters, printing companies, etc.). DIY books look DIY—readers are savvy and can tell when a book wasn't published properly. No matter how brilliant your book idea seems or how great your writing is, your book sales and author credibility will suffer if your book is amateurish.
8. **Consider publishing an ebook first** to test the market before investing in publishing a print book, especially if you can't afford to hire professionals or aren't sure how well readers will like your book. You can always publish a print version later.
9. **Read and understand all contracts before signing.** Reputable service providers will make their contracts readily available to you. Make sure you understand the services, fees, timeline, printing costs, royalty policy, etc. If anything is unclear, consult an attorney.
10. **Get all of your book's original production files** from your designer or self-publishing company after the book is published. This is very important—it seems obvious but is not a given. Check the contract to be sure it's stated clearly that you own and will receive the files.

Publishing Resources

- Kim Bookless, Publishing Consultant/Writer/Editor, www.kimbookless.com
- Chicago Self-Publishing Group, www.meetup.com/chicago-self-publishing
- Chicago Women in Publishing (CWIP), www.cwip.org
- *The Fine Print of Self-Publishing* by Mark Levine, www.bookpublisherscompared.com

Kim Bookless is a publishing consultant and book editor. She guides authors through the self-publishing maze by explaining the process, creating publishing strategies, recommending service providers, and managing the book production process. She is President of Chicago Women in Publishing (CWIP) www.cwip.org and leads the Chicago Self-Publishing Group <http://www.meetup.com/chicago-self-publishing>.