
SELF-PUBLISHING OPTIONS:

EBOOKS AND PRINT

ON DEMAND

Even writers who have enjoyed commercial success in the past face daunting odds against landing a commercial publisher today. In the United States, trade publishers buy some 10 percent or less of the books that are offered to them. Literary merit has less to do with what editors decide to publish than whether a book is likely to generate a profit, and traditional houses are very reluctant to take risks on commercially unproven writers.

One of the bright spots in the otherwise grim publishing landscape is the recent rise of viable and inexpensive self-publishing options. In the past few years, thousands have resorted to self-publishing and placed their books on virtual shelves alongside commercially published titles. Some have even earned a profit (although profits are usually small). If approached with realistic expectations and proper precautions, self-publishing can be a good alternative to a deal with a commercial publisher. Self-publishing lets you control more elements of publication than traditional publishing allows, such as the book's appearance and format, retail price, and how long it will stay in print. Some recent self-published titles—largely in the non-fiction niche and religious markets and the romance/erotica genres—have achieved remarkable success. The blockbuster *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy started life as a self-published ebook. A popular self-

published book can often bring an offer from a major publisher, as *Fifty Shades* and others have, because a book that succeeds with the public is the holy grail of publishing. When the commercial houses see such a title resonating in the marketplace, they invariably will approach the writer with a generous offer.

The information in this chapter will help you navigate the self-publishing options available for both the print-on-demand (POD) and ebook formats. Be aware that, more than any other part of the industry, the market, players, technology, and services offered in this area are in a constant state of rapid change. Currently, competition among the players is fierce, Amazon wields mighty market advantages, and the costs of formatting and distribution continue to decrease as technology advances. As a consequence, there are opportunities—but also pitfalls—for writers. If you are considering self-publishing, your due diligence should include researching and comparing the various services offered and examining the titles published by several different providers⁸⁹ before choosing how to proceed.

A simple online search for self-publishing companies will yield dozens of options. To cut through their marketing hype and create the optimal scenario for your book, you should have some background knowledge about what publishing a book entails.⁹⁰

PUBLISHING BUSINESS MODELS

Trade book publishers pay authors for the right to publish their work and incur the entire cost of producing, marketing, and distributing the books. Their profits come solely from sales of the books and some subsidiary rights, so their financial incentive, which their writers share, is to sell as many copies as they can. By contrast, self-publishing firms make money by charging authors to make their books available to the public. Among the firms, the fee structures and services offered vary, but for most of them, their main source of profit is in the services sold to authors. No matter

⁸⁹ For simplicity, the entities offering self-publishing services will be called “publishers” here.

⁹⁰ Part of what is exciting in this arena is the changing definition of a “book.” The available services work well for long-form articles, fan fiction, and fictional “shorts,” none of which are typically taken on by traditional publishers.

what their sales associates tell you, most of these firms have little financial incentive to sell many copies of your book.⁹¹

A writer who wants to self-publish can easily do so by signing a contract with an ebook or POD publisher (several of the firms offer to publish in both formats as part of a bundle) and handing over a digital file of the manuscript and—depending on the services purchased—a pile of money. A number of the firms offer tiers of package deals that include a menu of various services: editing, copyediting, formatting the manuscript, creating a cover, assigning an ISBN (unique identifier), listing it for sale with various wholesalers and retail sites, distribution, promotion, and collecting and paying royalties. Other firms allow you simply to convert your manuscript into an ebook format—there are several formats, including PDF—and offer it for sale in various forums. They collect and account for your royalties, and do little else. Some of these charge a modest flat fee and let you keep most or all the royalties. Others do not charge up front, but take a larger cut of the royalties. The bare bones services do not provide editing, copyediting, cover and interior design or formatting.

Whichever you choose, it falls to you to evaluate each service and fee structure offered by the publishers you are considering, and to ensure that every element of your book is acceptable to you. Moreover, even if you pay for promotional help, prepare to market the book on your own. Because it is so easy to self-publish, your book will be competing for readers with many others and your publisher will do very little, if anything, to help you break out of the crowd.

PRINT ON DEMAND

On a per-unit basis, printed books are much more expensive to produce than ebooks, so they cost significantly more at retail and face longer odds in the marketplace. For that reason, many writers prefer to publish first in ebook form and then add a print component if circumstances warrant. Other writers literally want to see and sell their work in print. For them, there are several credible companies that produce and sell books on demand (most also offer the ebook format option). Readers can find these titles

⁹¹ True, if the publisher takes on a high enough volume of titles, as Amazon and others seek to do, they can earn a profit from royalties on sales of each title. But their incentive is to sign you and many others up, not to make your book a bestseller.

at most online bookselling sites, order them, and receive them in quality paperback or hardcover form just as they do trade publishers' books. The difference is that POD books are printed, bound, and shipped individually only after the reader has ordered them. There is no print run, the books are not waiting in warehouses to be shipped, and retail stores do not order them for their inventories.⁹²

Many credible firms offer POD services.⁹³ These firms charge an upfront fee, ranging from around \$1,000 to \$15,000 depending on the services chosen, and also take a percentage of the net royalty on copies sold. They set minimum prices for the titles. Theoretically, the high unit costs to these firms of producing and shipping single copies justify these terms, but whether any individual firm's terms are competitive is another question. Fortunately, it is not hard to compare publishers' terms—most are posted on their websites. To compare quality, look at the books they publish and look for reviews on bookstore websites and elsewhere.

EBOOKS

Ebooks are digitally formatted books available for download to a computer or dedicated reader such as the iPad, Kindle, Nook, or Microsoft Reader. Because they cost so little to produce on a per unit basis, ebooks can be priced quite cheaply—thousands of self-published titles are offered for less than a dollar, and many are free. A writer seeking to self-publish in ebook form can readily do so by creating an account with an ebook publisher, formatting the manuscript from a digital file into the required format, creating a cover from a jpeg file, deciding on the retail price, and sending it. Most ebook publishers take a royalty on sales, charge a modest flat fee to format and post the book, or use a combination of fee plus royalty share.

⁹² Some bricks and mortar retailers have begun to offer POD in their stores.

⁹³ If your work was ever published with an established US publisher and is now out of print, the Authors Guild offers Backinprint.com, an online bookstore and POD service for out-of-print books (www.backinprint.com). Through Backinprint, POD publisher iUniverse prepares a digital file from a physical copy of the original edition, allowing for production of quality paperbacks with original cover designs and perfect bindings. The books, which sell for about \$10 to \$20, are listed for sale at Backinprint.com, iUniverse.com, Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com, and every other online bookstore. Writers receive a royalty of 20 percent of net receipts. The up-front cost to participants (who must be Guild members) is free in most cases.

Of course, it is not quite as simple as it sounds if you want your book to be your best possible offering to the marketplace. Whether you choose to publish in ebook, POD, or both formats, if you are going to self-publish, you should understand how to make a book. A shoddy-looking product is almost worse than nothing; it is unlikely to sell many copies and will not gain favorable attention from reviewers or commercial publishers. The first decision you will need to make, then, is whether to let the publisher provide the essential elements of the book or to do it yourself. When deciding on the candidates for your business, examine books they have designed, edited, and published and decide whether you want yours to resemble theirs. You might decide that the financial terms and distribution services offered by a firm work for you but that you would rather provide editing and design yourself. Of course, hiring your own editors and designers costs money and time, too, but having control over the end product might be worth it to you.

EDITING AND COPYEDITING

Substantive and meaningful editorial input by a professional is one of the great advantages offered by commercial publishers. Realistically, every writer, even the great ones, needs a good editor to make her work the best it can be. Some publishers offer editorial services in their packages, but you should assess the proposed editor's skill and your rapport before you commit to working with her. When speaking to the publisher's sales associate, ask about the editor's experience and past success, and the exact services included for the price. Will you be in direct contact with the editor, or will you receive written comments only? Make sure the editor's area of expertise is right for your project. Try to get a sample of her editorial feedback on past projects. You should also nail down an acceptable deadline for receiving editorial feedback. Remember, the publisher is trying to make money from your purchase of services; it is not as motivated to get your book into print as you are. Consequently, the editors on staff could have large backlogs of projects, meaning you might wait longer than you expect for a job that ends up being rushed.

Finding your own editor is not hard to do; many professional editors freelance. Your writers' organization might have a list of recommendations for book doctors or freelance editors. The Independent Editors Group (www.bookdocs.com), a group of distinguished former editors at com-

mercial publishers, is another good resource. The members are available for hire for freelance editing and evaluation and to give guidance throughout the self-publishing process; they can also recommend copyeditors and indexers. If you work with a freelance editor, you should have a contract with her that sets forth the fee structure (i.e., per project or by the hour or page count) and the services to be provided in detail. The contract should also make clear that all rights in the ultimate manuscript are and remain yours and that the editor and her associates will keep your project strictly confidential.

COVER AND DESIGN

Another hallmark of commercial publishers is the highly professional look—covers and interior designs and layouts—of their books. Badly designed or rendered covers and sloppy layouts are dead giveaways that a book is self-published. If you agree to have the publisher you have chosen design your book's layout and cover, it should give you the option to supply your own cover image if you wish and to approve of or choose the cover and possibly the interior design, at least from a menu of design options.

If you choose to provide your own cover and interior design, consider hiring a professional book designer to lay out and typeset the book. There are many freelance professionals who produce excellent work. Before deciding whether to retain a designer or to pay your publisher to design the book, ask to see samples of each of their work and to talk with previous clients. If you hire a designer, you should have a contract that describes the book, the specifications, including its dimensions and the number of pages, and whether the engagement will include cover design (for POD, this includes the front, spine, back, and flaps), the interior, or both. The contract should also:

- Specify the format in which the designer will deliver the finished product (e.g., mechanicals ready for printing or specifications to be followed by the publisher).

- Grant you all rights in the design (and any art included) to make any and all uses you wish to make, including promotional and advertising uses.

- Include the right to terminate the contract at any time without being liable for expenses not yet incurred.

- Provide that changes required because of the designer's error are the responsibility of the designer to correct.

ISBN NUMBER

“ISBN” stands for “International Standard Book Number” and it is exactly that—a unique identifier for every edition of a book that is used throughout the book industry. You cannot sell a book in any format in the marketplace without an ISBN. Most publishers will provide your book with an ISBN number as part of any package you buy, which has the advantage of saving you money. Because it is so much cheaper to buy ISBNs in bulk (as of this writing, they cost \$125 for one, \$250 for ten, \$1,000 for one thousand), the publisher should charge you very little, if anything, to assign one to your book. The downside of having a self-publishing firm supply the ISBN is that the firm is named as the publisher of your book on the cover and all retail listings. The only way to avoid that is to purchase your own ISBN number and create your own publisher name. Be aware that if you publish in more than one format (i.e., POD and ebook), you will need a separate ISBN for each. Only one organization sells ISBNs directly: Bowker. You can buy ISBNs online at www.bowker.com.

DISTRIBUTION OUTLETS

There are many online retail outlets that sell POD books and even more that sell ebooks. No matter which publisher or format (POD and/or ebook) you choose, it is important to ensure that your book will be available for sale on all of them. When choosing a publisher, a key question to ask is on which retail sites the potential publisher will list your book.⁹⁴ Some ebook publishers are aggregators for Apple’s iBooks platform, and they take a percentage of the royalties earned through iBooks in exchange for listing the book there (but they still should also list the book on the other sites). Other publishers will list your book on all available outlets as part of your package. Some, such as CreateSpace (Amazon), charge an additional fee to distribute through channels other than its own US and international sites.

Amazon offers higher royalties and a chance to gain exposure for ebooks through its Kindle Lending Library program if a writer agrees to list

⁹⁴ Very few, if any, bricks and mortar stores stock self-published titles, although this might change as the market changes. If you live near an independent retailer, it is worth approaching it about stocking your title, especially if you demonstrate that you can bring customers into the store.

exclusively with Amazon for at least ninety days. As of this writing, Amazon has 60 percent of the ebook market (including self- and commercially published titles), and this market share will probably rise. The pros and cons of casting your lot with Amazon on an exclusive basis, to the exclusion of every other outlet, will depend on your outlook and specific circumstances.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Although some publishers include promotional help in their packages, it is virtually impossible to generate significant sales unless you aggressively seek on your own to promote your book and/or employ expert help. It might make sense to include a publisher's promotional service in a package deal if it is not too expensive, but in order to gain attention in the market, your book will need more attention and active promotion than any self-publisher provides.

Many books and articles on this subject exist. One of the best is literary agent Noah Lukeman's *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent*. He argues that an author must establish effective promotional platforms in order to interest an agent and describes many ways to do so. His advice applies equally to marketing books. Other ways to generate attention and sales are:

If you do not already have one, establishing your own website (with your name and book titles as the domain names) is a must. The Authors Guild provides site-building software and domain name registration services at very low cost to members. It is relatively simple to do, and the promotion and marketing possibilities this essential platform provides are many.

Independent services for hire focus on social media, blogs, and other platforms, both online and offline, to promote titles. If you do not have the time and knowledge to do so yourself, consider retaining a reputable book marketing consultant.

Google Adwords/Keywords, social media-based promotion and paid ads, and other self-serve ad networks are considered necessities in the self-publishing arena.

Publications such as *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus* now review self-published books for a fee. Neither of them guarantees a favorable review, however, so you risk spending money for a result that might be worse than being ignored would have been.

Amazon's stature in the industry also offers benefits. Its Amazon Author Central page, for example, explains how writers can position their titles so that they surface in response to particular searches by users.

Explore the possibilities of social media. Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, and the like are potentially excellent platforms.

YOUR SELF-PUBLISHING CONTRACT

Your chosen publisher will offer you a contract, likely through its website, and expect you to “click” your acceptance of the terms. This makes it unlikely (though not impossible) that you will be able to negotiate changes to the boilerplate in these agreements.⁹⁵ Even so, you should read what you are agreeing to before you proceed so that you ensure the publisher observes basic industry standards and that you understand the transaction.

THE CONTRACT

You should seriously rethink signing with any publisher if its boilerplate contract deviates from the following fundamentals:

It should not include a broad grant of rights. No publisher should obtain rights that it does not have the means or intent to exploit to your advantage. The publisher needs the rights to create and sell ebooks and/or POD books, but the grant of rights should not define digital rights so broadly that it includes multimedia or audio book rights. If you are publishing in ebook format only, the grant of rights should not include “print” or “book publishing” rights.

No rights should be given on an exclusive basis. The grant of rights should explicitly say that they are nonexclusive. You are paying for a service, not to limit your options for the work.

The publisher should undertake to collect and remit all amounts due to you from sales and issue a report of sales and earnings at least once per quarter, if not more often. You should be able to access your account on the publisher's website and sales data should be available there in real time.

⁹⁵ These firms also commonly allow themselves the right to change the boilerplate at will; by continuing to use the service, customers are automatically agreeing to these changes.

If royalties are based on “net proceeds,” “net” should be explicitly defined. Most contracts define net as the retail price of the work sold, less third-party discounts and fees and the cost of conversion and encryption, but these should be reasonable.

Perhaps most important, make sure you have the right to terminate the contract on reasonable notice—no more than thirty days. You need the freedom to take your work elsewhere at any time you wish. If a commercial publisher takes notice and offers to publish your book, it will likely require you to grant ebook rights, and you should be free to accept the offer. It is fair for the contract to stipulate that upon termination, your publisher will have the right to continue selling copies for a reasonable period (no more than thirty days). This should not harm your dealings with a new publisher.

THE NEGOTIATION

Aside from the boilerplate terms, you should be able to negotiate the various components of the package deals offered by the full service companies, if you decide to go with one. Because they want your business, and presumably to sell you as many services as they can, they will have a sales associate contact you. Ask whether the firm will discount some of its offerings, or even throw in some services gratis. Other questions to ask:

How and to what extent will the publisher consult with you regarding, or allow you to choose, the appearance, format, production, copyediting, style, and promotion of the book? If you are paying the publisher for these services, do not be afraid to ask for samples and to speak with other clients before signing on.

Does the company's business model rely on the fees charged to writers to participate, on royalty revenue from sales of the books, or from a combination? Does it offer flexibility in the fee structure? For example, can any of the up-front fees be recouped from royalties earned? If you are counting on selling as many copies as you can, the royalty share model is generally preferable because it gives the publisher an incentive to sell the book. On the other hand, if your book becomes a runaway bestseller, you would be better off earning the lion's share of royalties.

Are the costs reasonable for the services provided? For example, what is the charge to convert a previously published work to ebook form and make it available for distribution through online retailers? If it is not available in digital form, the publisher will incur costs to convert and proofread it. If

you are sending your work in digital form and the publisher is not editing the book, conversion should be a minimal expense.

Retail price: for ebooks, the publisher should not dictate a minimum or maximum price. You should be able to give copies away if you choose, or to charge well over the market average if you choose.

Retail pricing for POD is different, because it costs the publisher to print, bind, and ship a hard copy, and it should be able to recoup its outlay. It is fair for POD publishers to dictate a minimum, but not a maximum, price.

For both formats, it is fair for the publisher to set your royalty rates based on the retail price you dictate, although not all of them do.

Does the company offer adequate piracy protection? Even though most companies use encryption protocols that are standard in the industry, unauthorized ebook sites are fairly rampant. Ask about the publisher's encryption protocols and whether and to what extent its titles have been pirated.

Keep in mind that the self-publishing industry is constantly changing. Currently, a lot of competition for your business exists. The best way to serve your interests is to apprise yourself on a regular basis of the current state of the industry. Compare books you admire and the ease with which you can find and access them. Amazon has a great competitive advantage in this arena right now, but there are other nimble and smart players out there that might be better for your needs.