

Ask the Book Doctor about Self-Publishing and What Being Published Means

By Bobbie Christmas

Q: Is there a time when self-publishing is a good idea?

A: Yes, at times, but the answer is not simple. I give an entire seminar on traditional publishing versus self-publishing, and I have a report you can order free that gives the pros and cons of each. The subject gets complicated, because within each category you have more choices plus more pros and cons of each, such as whether to use print-on-demand, e-books, or traditional printing. Go to www.zebraeditor.com and click on Tools for Writers. There you will find Report #110, Self-Publishing vs. Traditional Publishing.

Self-publishing makes sense if you write nonfiction and are willing to be a publisher, distributor, and marketer. Self-publishing also makes sense if you have a built-in audience of buyers that you reach regularly, such as if you have a big following on a blog or a large number of subscribers to a newsletter. Self-publishing certainly makes sense if you give seminars or talks where you can sell your book.

When my traditionally published book, *Write In Style*, was still in print, it far outsold my self-published books in numbers, but I made much less than a dollar for every book that sold. I make much more per book when I self-publish, so the profit margin is higher on my self-published books. I liked that the publisher who bought *Write In Style* gave it far wider distribution than I could have accomplished, though. As a result, the book gained me recognition in America, Canada, Australia, and other countries. I made little on the book, but I made much more in other ways, by gaining clients from around the world and increasing my reputation as a desirable speaker. Oh, and as a speaker, I could sell even more books at conferences and other gatherings for writers.

As you can see, sometimes it is a toss-up in deciding whether self-publishing is a good idea, so it depends on your total goals, not just your financial ones.

Q: I am thinking of self-publishing a how-to book. I have a way to reach my market, and I am a good writer, but I have heard self-publishing has a bad reputation. What's up with that?

A: Self-publishing originally gained a poor reputation because many self-published people skipped some major steps or tried to save money while self-publishing. As a result, the public came to consider all self-published books to be less than professional, because so many of them were indeed subpar. Gradually the stigma has softened, as more self-publishers go to great lengths to overcome that original blight on self-publishing.

You can overcome that stigma with your own book by not scrimping. Be professional at every step of the way. Before having the book laid out, always hire a professional book editor, one intimately familiar with Chicago style, to edit the manuscript. Traditional

book publishers use Chicago style, which dictates such things as where the commas go, what to capitalize, and when to write out numerals or use a number.

No matter how great a writer we may be, writers cannot edit themselves. We do not see our own mistakes. I am an editor, yet I use editors for my own books. I am still a human being, and we all make errors that only an outsider can catch.

The other place where some self-publishers scrimp is in the cover design. Do not use your own, your child's, or your friend's illustration on the cover, no matter how good you think the art may be. I can spot many self-published books simply by looking at the cover. If the first thing a potential buyer sees of the book—the outside artwork—gives them a bad impression, they will not buy the book. I think like most people, and if the cover looks less than professional, I assume the information inside is also less than professional.

The book cover, both front and back, is a strong sales tool. Use it to your advantage, but be sure to have all the copy on the front and back also edited professionally. What an embarrassment and expense it would be to find an error on the most important part of the book, after the book is printed.

Q: What does it mean to be published? You just write a book, get it printed, and you are published, right?

A: Some people think so. In actuality, if you self-publish—that is, pay any for portion of the publishing yourself—you have not proved that your writing is good enough that someone would want to read it or pay for it.

In truth, if you write an article for a newspaper, magazine, or newsletter that is not your own and the newspaper, magazine, or newsletter accepts and publishes the article, you are published. You do not have to get paid to be considered published. If you sell the rights to your book to a traditional publisher that pays all the expenses, releases your book, and pays you royalties, you are considered a published author. If you cover any part of the cost, however, you are self-published, which is not the same as being published.

Beware of the companies that call themselves royalty-paying publishers and claim their authors pay no part of the expenses. Traditional publishers do not have to make such claims. The companies that make such claims are usually not traditional publishers. They are companies that accept almost any book, and to cover their expenses, they charge extremely high prices for the books and print only the books that are pre-ordered. They are print-on-demand publishers, rather than traditional publishers. If you use such a company, you are still considered self-published.

If you do sell your work and someone else publishes it and pays you, you definitely are published and have earned bragging rights. If you self-publish a book, you may say you are published, but in serious circles, you will not be considered a published author. If a

traditional publisher buys the rights to your previously self-published book and rereleases it, however, then voila! You become a published author.

Bobbie Christmas, book editor and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to Bobbie@zebraeditor.com. Read more “Ask the Book Doctor” questions and answers at www.zebraeditor.com.