

Self-Publishing versus Traditional Publishing

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Authors must decide their goals and plans before they can decide whether to try to find a traditional publisher or to self-publish. The following report gives you information so you can decide what you want out of the business of writing as well as what you are willing to do. It covers self-publishing and traditional publishing and includes the advantages and disadvantages of print-on-demand (POD), standard printing, and e-publishing.

Traditional Publishing

Author writes a novel (fiction) or book proposal (nonfiction) and sells it to a publisher, with or without the aid of an agent.

Advantages

In some circles traditional publishing has more prestige than self-publishing

Publisher takes the risk

Publisher pays all costs of production

Publisher secures ISBN number (so bookstores will accept book)

Publisher ensures barcode appears on back cover (assists bookstores in sales)

Author usually receives an advance against royalties

Author receives royalties

Publisher distributes book

Distributor can get the book in more places, including brick-and-mortar bookstores

Publisher handles layout and design of inside and cover

Publisher often provides artwork if necessary

Publisher usually registers copyright in name of author, so author does not have to do so

Publisher might list the book in its catalogue

Publisher might promote the book

Publisher might help with publicity and/or book tours

Publisher might assist with editing

Publisher might provide galleys that allow author to correct errors before going to press

Author has better chance of selling more copies than if self-published

Disadvantages

Author often does not make enough profit to offer discounts

Selling to a traditional publisher is difficult; odds are not in the favor of author

Author must write a full book proposal for nonfiction books

The process of looking for a publisher can be tedious, time-consuming, and disappointing

Author or author's agent must negotiate a workable contract with publisher

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The time between contract signing and book production can be anywhere from six months to five years
Royalties are a small percentage of book price and are paid only every six months or once a year
Author loses a great deal of control over the quality, quantity, sale price, and book title
Author may have to give right of first refusal for next book
Author must trust publisher that sales reports are accurate
Author probably will not be allowed to sell the book in any way that appears to be in competition with publisher (for example, may not be able to sell book on author's Web site or produce an audio version of the book without publisher participation)

Self-Publishing

Author writes the book and arranges for ISBN number, barcode, internal layout, cover design, printing, and delivery.

Advantages

The book definitely gets published
Author can produce book faster than most traditional publishers can
Author does not have to write a formal nonfiction book proposal
Author skips the tedious and daunting task of submitting to agents and publishers
Author does not have to deal with rejections
Author does not have to negotiate with a publisher
Author determines book quality and whether hardback or paperback
Author determines selling price
Author controls internal and external design as well as content
Author makes more money per book (if priced right) and retains all profits
Author may sell the book in any way possible through Internet sales, Amazon.com, and at gatherings and book signings
Authors do not wait for or rely on a publisher to pay royalties; instead, income is immediate with each sale
Author may offer discounts to enhance sales

Disadvantages

Author goes into publishing business; needs a business plan
Author pays all costs and takes all risks
Author must secure ISBN number and barcode if hoping to sell books in stores
Author must register copyright before going to press
Author must get tax ID and collect, report, and pay sales tax
Book probably will not be accepted into bookstores unless sold through a distributor as a returnable book
Author must give distributor a percentage plus give bookstores a deep discount
Author must be sure book is edited, preferably by a professional who uses Chicago Style
Author must carefully proof the galleys for errors in content and design
Author gets no advance

Author must distribute books and fulfill orders or arrange for order-fulfillment services
Author must get professional assistance or know how to design a professional-looking cover created with marketing in mind
Self-published books have less prestige than traditionally published ones
Author may have to warehouse books, preferably in a climate-controlled environment
Author can lose money if books do not sell
Author will probably sell fewer copies of the book than if traditionally published and nationally distributed (based on national averages)

Self-Publishing Options

Print-on-Demand

POD is a digital copying process capable of producing small runs, as few as one book at a time.

Advantages

No warehousing of books necessary
Initial investment usually smaller than standard printing; volume is lower
Less financial risk because of lower investment
If error noted in book, file can be changed before next book is printed
Some POD printers (usually for added cost) promote books on Web site and fulfill orders directly to buyers
Some POD printers (for added cost) assist with internal layout and cover design
Some POD printers (for added cost) supply editing

Disadvantages

Quality of printing can vary; covers may curl
Price per book is higher
Author often does not get much (if any) of a price break for ordering in quantity
Author has to be sure to order books well enough in advance of speaking engagements to ensure they arrive in time
If file is changed to correct errors, it creates various versions of same book and can be confusing
Quality of internal and cover design often less than stellar and rarely is unique to book, because most POD printers offer a limited variety of templates
Quality of editing (when provided) is questionable, and you have no personal contact with your editor
Many POD printers offer only paperback, not hardback
Process uses toner rather than ink; durability of toner unknown

Standard Book Printing

Standard printing uses a printing press and produces books in quantity, often 200 or more as the minimum.

Advantages

Price per book is lower
Quality consistent within each printing run
Quantity discounts can lower price per book more, to increase profit per sale
Books are printed in advance and stored, ready for any event
Easy to get hardback versions if desired

Disadvantages

Must print higher quantity than POD, usually between 200 and 1,000 copies
Authors must warehouse books
Initial investment usually higher because of quantity
More funds at risk than POD method
Number of pages often limited to specific quantities to fit press requirements (some require multiples of 16 pages, for example)

E-Books

An e-book is an electronic book. The author creates a digital file that is transformed into a PDF. Buyers download the e-book from a Web site (or author e-mails it), and buyers can choose to print it out or read it on screen.

Advantages

Little to no cost for production
No shipping costs
Books can be ready to sell quickly; no time lost in printing
Book can be as short or as long as you want
Book can have clickable links so readers can jump to Web sites mentioned in book
No warehousing of product
Product can be updated easily and as often as the author wishes
E-books can include bookmarks that facilitate navigation in the book

Disadvantages

Sales often sluggish—more people prefer printed books to e-books
Impulse sales often lost; event goes unlikely to remember to buy book later online
Author must handle all design or pay to have it done, including creation of PDF files

(Note: I strongly recommend turning e-books into PDF files. Portable Document Format files cannot be changed and are readable with a free Adobe Acrobat Reader program that is easily downloadable to any computer.)

As a general rule, traditionally published nonfiction books have the best sales rates, with traditionally published fiction second. Similarly, self-published nonfiction usually sells better than self-published fiction or poetry. Because self-published fiction and poetry are the lowest on the sales list, I do not recommend that writers self-publish fiction and poetry unless they diligently promote their books and/or already have a strong following.

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