

SELF-PUBLISHING PRIMER

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A Writer's Words, An Editor's Eye
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Chapter I – Introduction

This e-book began life as a series of fourteen posts about self-publishing on my blog [A Writer's Words, An Editor's Eye](#) in February 2007. I had touched on the subject of self-publishing in [Finding a Publisher](#), but posts on other blogs and comments from my clients convinced me there was a need for more depth on the subject.

At the time I started the series, the following disparate views of self-publishing had recently been posted:

Richard Hoy, in [The Supposed Problems With Self-Publishing on the BookLocker Guide to POD and Ebook Publishing](#), said: “But here is the elephant in the room no one wants to talk about—the traditional publishing process sucks. Many manuscripts go unpublished every year not because they are bad, but because traditional publishers don’t know how to find the book’s market in a cost-effective manner. That is where POD publishers like BookLocker can provide a real service, as long as the return on investment is good.”

Paul Genesse, in [How do I get published? on The Blog of Fantasy Author Paul Genesse](#), said: “Self-publishing non-fiction is somewhat accepted if you travel and give talks on your area of expertise and have a need to sell material to people in your field of interest, but if you are a fiction writer self-publishing can be the kiss of death.”

In a recent conversation, my client, David Bowles, author of [The Westward Sagas](#), told me how glad he is that he decided to self-publish his historical fiction. “Unless you’re a big name or have a big platform that would attract a national audience, self-publishing is the only way to go. You row your own boat, but to be successful, you have to research and line up a good editor, designer, and printer.”

A new client, an interior designer writing a book to help people decorate their own homes, listened to the information that you’ll find in the next few posts and determined that self-publishing was the best route to publication for her.

You might be surprised at some of the successful authors who have self-published their work throughout history. Visit [John Kremer's Self-Publishing Hall of Fame](#) to learn more.

To the cynic, it might look like I am a fan of self-publishing because much of freelance editing is for self-publishing authors. However, that is the reverse of what actually happened—I was a fan of self-publishing first and then started working with writers who want to self-publish.

However, self-publishing is definitely not for everyone. [The Tricky Art of Self-Publishing by Foster J. Dickson at Writer's Resource Center](#) gives a brief overview of the topic and suggests some cases where self-publishing is appropriate.



Chapter 2 – What is traditional publishing?

Before you can decide if self-publishing is appropriate for you, you have to understand what it is and how it compares to other forms of publishing. This is not designed to be a glossary of publishing terms, and others may disagree with my terminology. But the descriptions that follow make it easy for my clients to understand the different types of publishing.

Most people understand what is often called [traditional, trade, or commercial publishing](#):

- A company—a mega-conglomerate in New York or a small regional press anywhere—contracts to publish your book.
- The company pays all the costs of production and does all the work to publish the book.
- You as the author are paid a royalty (which can be as small as 6% on gross sales and can vary considerably depending on the publisher, the author's previous publishing experience, whether the author or an agent/attorney negotiates the contract, whether the royalty is calculated on gross or net sales, and more).
- Since books are returnable to the publisher if not sold by the bookstore, a certain percentage of the royalty payments will be held in reserve to cover returns.
- A publisher usually specializes in particular genres and requires a query letter first. If the query letter captures the editor's interest and the subject of the book fits what the company is seeking, you may be asked for a proposal (a synopsis or outline and sample chapters). If the editor likes the proposal, you may be asked for a complete manuscript. A manuscript under serious consideration may be reviewed by several different people. The process may take months (even years).
- Only a small fraction of the books submitted to traditional publishers are accepted for publication. Many are rejected because they are bad, but many others are rejected because they don't fit what the publisher needs at that time. Writers hate to get that standard rejection form letter: "Your manuscript does not meet our publishing needs at this time." But it doesn't mean you don't have a great book—it just means that your book didn't make the cut of the relatively small number of books the publisher considered the best fit to what the marketing department expects to be able to sell in large numbers.
- Some publishers will consider manuscripts only from literary agents, so the writer may have to go through the process of finding an agent before finding a publisher.
- Most writers who choose this publishing route spend several years writing and querying publishers and receive many rejections before their first manuscript is accepted.
- Publication can take a year or two ... or more ... from the time the contract is signed until the book is available in bookstores.

- The writer has little control over the process—a publisher may change the title, require extensive edits in the manuscript, and choose a book cover that the writer doesn't think is appropriate for the story.
- Except in rare cases, the publisher devotes very little promotion to a first-time author's book.
- The publisher is responsible for distributing the books to bookstores and other retail outlets, so your book will generally be widely available (at least from the large companies; distribution is more limited from small presses).
- Books published by trade publishers have credibility with reviewers, booksellers, and the public because they have been through an extensive vetting process before being published.
- Authors must promote their book to some extent for the book to sell well, but the distribution in bookstores and the credibility of the publisher makes it easier to sell large quantities of books.

Next, we'll talk about the other end of the publishing spectrum.



Your manuscript is only one of a huge mountain of manuscripts a traditional publisher faces.

Chapter 3 – What is vanity publishing?

The last chapter covered traditional publishing. At the other end of the spectrum is [vanity publishing](#):

- A company contracts with you to publish your book.
- The company charges you for all the costs of production, but it does the work you have paid for to publish the book.
- Manuscripts are not screened; if the author has the money to pay the fees, the company will publish the book.
- Often, the company does nothing more than create a cover (possibly from a template), lay out the interior, and print the book; if the author wants editing or an original cover design, each service is an expensive add-on.
- You as the author may be paid a royalty (after you've already paid all the costs of production), but books are generally not widely-distributed and marketing is nonexistent without more expensive add-ons (and the value of the marketing is likely to be far less than the cost).
- Or you may receive hundreds or thousands of copies of your book to market yourself.
- Because the vanity publishers are well-known in the publishing world, bookstores do not generally stock these titles and reviewers don't review them.
- Many of the vanity publishers now call themselves [POD publishers](#) and offer authors print-on-demand services. With POD, authors don't end up with a garage or bedroom full of books—books can be printed as orders are received. The quality of POD books varies considerably, and the convenience of being able to order books one at a time (and sometimes expensive set-up fees) can increase the cost so much that a book could become too expensive for the market.
- The company may call itself a traditional, subsidy, POD, co-op publisher—or some other innocuous-sounding name. However, if you pay very high costs and do not receive the full gamut of publishing services, the publisher is really a vanity publisher.

Next, we'll talk about subsidy publishing.



To a vanity publisher, the most important thing you'll write is a check.

Chapter 4 – What is subsidy publishing?

We've talked about traditional publishing and vanity publishing. In the middle of these extremes are subsidy publishing and self-publishing.

We'll talk more about do-it-yourself publishing in a future chapter, but here we'll address subsidy publishing:

- A vanity publisher can look deceptively like a subsidy publisher; in fact, all vanity publishers ARE subsidy publishers—the author pays a company to publish the book—but in my mind, at least, not all subsidy publishers are vanity publishers.
- The two primary differences between a legitimate subsidy company that is a viable option for an author and a vanity publisher to avoid are these: 1) while the subsidy publisher will make a profit on all the services it provides, the author will receive value for the money spent; and 2) while a subsidy publisher will not be as selective as a traditional publisher, a legitimate one will screen and edit the manuscript rather than printing anything that the customer pays for.
- Many subsidy publishers use POD technology and may call themselves POD publishers. You will find good information and advice about POD from [The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America](#), [Writing-World.com](#), and [The Publishing Game](#).
- Authors who choose to use a subsidy publisher need to compare the prices, services, and reputations of various companies. You can find a [price comparison chart of POD publishers at Publishing Basics](#). Order copies of a few of the titles published by the company to judge the quality for yourself. Research online, and ask authors who have used the company about their experiences.
- Subsidy publishing will be more expensive than self-publishing, but you will not have to spend the time or learn what is needed to publish a book.
- Subsidy publishing may be a good choice for an author who is publishing a single book for a limited audience—a family history, for example—especially if the author has neither the time nor the interest in production.
- Subsidy publishing is probably not a good choice if you want your book in bookstores or if you expect a large volume of sales to a wide audience.

Next, after all this background, we'll talk about self-publishing.



Subsidy publishing may be a good choice if you want to see your book in print without doing the work of self-publishing.

Chapter 5 – What is self-publishing?

We've talked about other kinds of publishing, including subsidy publishing. Sometimes authors believe that subsidy publishing is the same as self-publishing because the author pays all the costs of production in both. In [Subsidy Publishing vs. Self-Publishing](#), Writing-World gives a good explanation of the differences between subsidy publishing and self-publishing.

Now let's look at self-publishing:

- Rather than dealing with a publishing company, you the author create your own publishing company. You become a businessperson as well as a writer.
- You as the author and publisher are responsible for all the costs of publishing the book. You own all the books that are printed, and you receive all the income from sales.
- You are in complete control of all aspects of publication, including editorial decisions, design/layout, cover art, and printing. No one else can put a cover on your book that you don't think accurately reflects the content. No one can make you edit out a secondary plot or change the title of your story.
- You retain all rights to your book.
- With the total control comes total responsibility. You have to learn what is involved in publishing and either perform every task yourself or hire someone else to do it. If you don't make it happen, it doesn't happen.
- You can usually publish a book much faster than a traditional publisher.
- Because anyone can self-publish a book—and there many poor quality self-published books hitting the market every day—they lack the credibility of books published by a conventional publisher. Bookstores and reviewers are often reluctant to review or carry self-published books.
- The author is totally responsible for promotion, marketing, and distribution.

Next, we'll consider the pros and cons of self-publishing.



As a self-publisher, you will run a business.

Chapter 6 – What are the pros and cons of self-publishing?

The pros and cons of self-publishing may seem self-evident from the description in the previous chapter. However, let's break down the characteristics of self-publishing into benefits and disadvantages.

Advantages of self-publishing include:

- You, the author, are in complete control. Your book cannot be rejected or changed by a publisher who may not have the same vision for the book that you do.
- You can bring your book to market much faster than a commercial publisher would.
- You own all the rights to the book and all the books that are printed. You make all the profit.
- You set your own price and marketing strategies.
- You can take advantage of your personal platform, your niche market, your target audience that a publisher might not be able to reach. You can use your book to build your credibility as a professional, to promote other products, or to supplement a speaking career.

Disadvantages of self-publishing include:

- You must become a businessperson as well as a writer.
- You must pay all the costs of publishing and marketing.
- You must either learn how to do every task involved in publishing your book or find and hire competent people. Either way you will have to learn new skills and spend time on production and marketing in addition to writing your book.
- You must learn to treat your book as a product, not just as your creation, and to make decisions based on business and marketing considerations.
- Self-publishing lacks the prestige of commercial publishing, and you will find it challenging to get reviews and distribution in bookstores.

For **other views of the pros and cons of self-publishing**, read the following articles:

- [Find a Publisher, Co-Publish or Self-Publish: Which One to Choose?](#) by Mary Embree for [Small Publishers, Artists & Writers Network \(SPAWN\)](#)
- [Pros and Cons of Self-Publishing](#) from Gropen Associates, Inc.
- [Writers, Readers and Self-Publishing](#) by Ambrose Musiyiwa of Blog Critics Magazine

Next, we'll look at who should self-publish. Is self-publishing right for you and your book?

Gather information before
deciding which way to go.



