

Top Tips for Better Books: Advice from a Publishing Consultant

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Self-publishing offers wonderful opportunities to writers who are willing to invest time, money, and effort to produce a quality book. Doing it properly requires a leap of faith and the willingness to accept some risk. The good news is you don't have to (and shouldn't!) go through the process alone. Understanding the self-publishing process—including how to find and work with great self-publishing service providers—will save you thousands of dollars and lots of frustration.

The ideal publishing process

Writing → Manuscript evaluation → Developmental editing → Copyediting → Design [cover design, interior design/layout, ebook conversion] → Proofreading → Printing → Distribution

5 things needed to self-publish well

- A quality manuscript
- An entrepreneurial mindset
- An adequate budget
- The ability to be comfortable with risk
- The willingness to consistently promote yourself and your writing

3 main ways to publish a book

1. **Traditional Publishing:** The publishing company buys the publishing rights from author. The publisher pays book production/distribution/marketing costs and the author gets about 10 percent of the royalties. The author often has little input on cover design, pricing, marketing, etc.
2. **Self-Publishing:** The author retains publishing rights and pays all production/distribution/marketing costs. The author shares royalties with retailers like Amazon for distribution but does not share royalties with the self-publishing company or service providers. The author has complete control over all decisions related to the book, including editing, design, retail price, and how it's marketed.
3. **Hybrid Publishing:** Hybrid publishing models vary considerably in terms of ownership, rights, fees, royalty arrangements, creative control, and printing and distribution options. Visit the Independent Book Publisher Association (IBPA) website to learn more: ibpa-online.org/page/hybridpublisher

3 ways to self-publish a book

1. **Do it yourself** – You'll need help, so the DIY method is not recommended. Self-publishing is a lot of work and has a significant learning curve, so DIY does not yield good results unless you happen to be an editor, book designer, and proofreader. If you're a novice, there are many ways to go wrong.
2. **A la carte** – Can give good results if you work with professional service providers, but still has a big learning curve. Requires you to learn the entire publishing process, know how to find and work with good service providers, and invest significant time and effort in project management.
3. **Full-service self-publishing company** – May give good results and removes some of the project management burden, but **be very careful**. Do your due diligence before hiring: vet the company thoroughly, read and understand the entire publishing contract, and talk to previous clients.

A Fourth Option – Hire an independent project manager to coordinate the book production process for you. Your project manager will choose and oversee editors, designers, proofreaders, printers, and distribution experts to ensure you publish a top-quality book. Budget permitting, it's money well spent!

3 most important questions to ask yourself before you self-publish

Your answers will determine your entire publishing process, including which self-publishing method is best for you, how long the process will take, and whether you should hire marketing help:

1. **Why are you publishing the book?** If you want to put your book on the market, plan to invest more money in editing/design than if you're writing a family history you don't plan to sell.
2. **What are your goals for the book?** For example, if you're a professional and you want to self-publish a book to give you credibility and market yourself or your company, you'll need to invest in top-notch editing and design and have a solid marketing plan for your book.
3. **How much money can you afford to invest in the book?** To self-publish well, you'll need professional editors, designers, and proofreaders, plus a solid distribution and marketing plan. If you want to publish a print book, you'll need to factor in printing costs. When you add up the costs for all the services, it will cost thousands of dollars to produce and distribute a quality print book. If you're on a tight budget, consider starting with an ebook or even postponing the self-publishing process until you can save the money needed for professional editing, design, and marketing.

10 steps to publishing a well-written, well-edited, well-designed book

1. **Writing the manuscript** – Consider hiring a writing coach, which will eliminate the need for Step 2 below. Otherwise, before you start writing your manuscript, read books on how to write, take writing classes, join critique groups, use beta readers, etc. Always start with an outline. Your manuscript should be a MS Word file with 12-point Times New Roman font and double-spaced lines.
2. **Manuscript evaluation / full developmental edit** – This step is optional but highly recommended if you didn't work with a writing coach when composing your manuscript. In a manuscript evaluation, a professional developmental editor reads your manuscript and creates a report showing strengths and areas that could be improved then recommends revisions to be made before publishing. The author can make the revisions unassisted, but it's best to hire the editor to do a full developmental edit to help the author make the recommended revisions. If you're certain you need developmental help, you can bypass the manuscript evaluation and go straight into a full developmental edit.
3. **Copyediting** – Please don't skip this step—it's so important! Copyediting uses MS Word's track changes feature to fix errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, word usage, capitalization, etc., and ensure style guide compliance. All books being put on the market should have at least one round.
4. **Manuscript formatting** – This is a short clean-up step before the book enters design. Before moving into book production (steps 5 through 7 below), make sure the manuscript is clean and all suggested copyedits have been accepted or rejected. If your book has images, charts, graphs, etc., you'll need to submit those files to your designer separately; go through your manuscript and insert formatting tags as placeholders for your images and their captions. Check with your designer on how to do this.
5. **Cover design** – People absolutely *will* judge your book by its cover! It is one of your best author marketing tools. It should feature compelling imagery and easy-to-read text to entice potential readers to explore further. It should look appealing at a variety of sizes, from full size to the small thumbnails used in online retail listings. A well-designed self-published book is indistinguishable from a book published by a traditional publisher, and you need a professional cover designer for this. Don't try to design it yourself; hire a professional freelance cover designer or work with a reputable self-publishing service provider.

6. **Interior design/layout** – Designing / laying out (typesetting) the interior of a print book is a complex process and there is a steep learning curve. For best results, hire a professional freelance book designer or work with a reputable self-publishing service provider to design your book’s interior using Adobe InDesign. A word processing program like MS Word is *not* the right tool for this job.
7. **Ebook formatting** – Ebook formatting is a completely different process than designing a print book and requires skill to do well. Ebook conversion has a learning curve and usually requires knowledge of HTML. It’s best to hire a professional ebook formatter, especially if your book has a complex layout and/or lots of images, text boxes, sidebars, etc. You’ll need both .mobi and .epub file formats.
8. **Proofreading** – Proofreading is critically important to the quality of your book because it is the last opportunity to correct any design and content errors before publication. If you’re not working with a self-publishing service provider that provides this service, hire a professional freelance proofreader.
9. **Printing** – Print on Demand (POD) from companies like Amazon works well for smaller quantities of books; digital/offset printing is best for larger quantities. Hardcover books and books with color interiors are expensive to print and require you to artificially inflate your retail price to compensate.
10. **Distribution** –POD and ebook direct distribution through Amazon KDP and IngramSpark is easy, budget friendly, and the best to maximize your market reach and royalty rates. Expanded distribution may increase the *possibility* of book being carried in bookstores/libraries but is complicated, expensive, and requires printing a quantity of books to be stored in a warehouse.

Book Marketing

Book marketing, publicity, promotion, author branding, and building an author platform are important and complex endeavors. There are entire books written and courses offered on this one aspect of publishing. Consider hiring marketing/publicity/branding help, if your budget permits, but vet companies carefully.

- **Start marketing early**—ideally *before* you begin the publishing process.
- **Get ready to work**—you’ll have to do some of the marketing yourself, even if you hire help.
- **Set up an author website**—it doesn’t have to be elaborate but it should look professional.
- **Be strategic**—blogging and social media can be helpful, but you should have a strategy and be consistent in your posting. Social media should complement your author website, not replace it.
- **Consider PR/media outreach**—media/radio/podcast appearances are great to promote your book.

Top Tips: My Best Self-Publishing Advice

1. **Allocate a proper budget that enables you to hire professional publishing service providers (freelance editors, designers, and proofreaders; printing and distribution companies; book marketers, etc.) or a reputable self-publishing service provider.** DIY books usually look DIY—readers are savvy and can tell when a book wasn’t published properly. No matter how brilliant your writing, your book sales and author credibility will suffer if you publish a book that looks amateurish or is full of errors. If necessary, postpone publishing the book and save your money until you can afford to hire professionals—you will want to work with trained, reputable people who produce books for a living!
2. **But don’t spend money you can’t afford to lose.** Think of your self-publishing budget as “Vegas money”—you set it aside and hope to make a profit, but you won’t experience financial hardship if things don’t go as planned. When preparing your publishing budget, make sure your expectations are realistic. Book sales may be slow in the months following launch, and most distributors pay a month or two in arrears, so don’t count on royalty income right away.

3. **Understand that publishing is a financial/emotional risk and not everyone will like your book.** Publish the best book you can but be prepared for the possibility of low sales and negative reviews. Resist the urge to argue with people who leave negative reviews.
4. **Buy your own ISBNs, even if you're working with a reputable self-publishing service provider.** Buy your own so that you're the publisher of record. You'll need one ISBN for each of book format (hardcover, softcover, ebook, audiobook, etc.). In the US, buy ISBNs only at www.myidentifiers.com.
5. **Do not publish an unedited or improperly edited book.** Work with a writing coach or get a manuscript review and/or full developmental edit to improve your content, then hire a professional copyeditor for at least one round of copyediting before your book's interior is designed. Hire a professional proofreader to do at least one round of proofreading of the back cover and interior.
6. **Get permission in writing to use images, illustrations, or anything you didn't write or create yourself, even if you paid someone to create the work for you.** If you have any doubt about using something without written permission, consult an attorney. Failure to obtain written permission to publish things you don't own the rights to can result in legal problems. This article gives great insight on fair use and permissions: janefriedman.com/sample-permission-letter/.
7. **Consider publishing an ebook first.** Use an ebook to test the market before investing in publishing a print book, especially if you're working with a small budget. Ebook publishing is usually quicker, cheaper, and easier than print publishing, and you can always publish a print version later.
8. **Thoroughly read all service provider and self-publishing company contracts before signing.** Reputable service providers will make their contracts readily available to you. You must understand the service offerings, fee structure, printing costs, royalty policy, etc. before signing. Consult an attorney on anything not clear, *especially* if the contract is from a large self-publishing company.
9. **Get all of your book's original production/source files** from your self-publishing service provider or freelance designer after the work is complete. This is very important—check the contract to be sure it's stated clearly that you will be given the files when the project is done. You're paying someone to produce the book, so make sure you have the final files in your possession when the work is done.
10. **Register your book's copyright.** There are varying opinions on when to register your copyright, but all experts agree you should do it. I recommend registering it near the end of the publishing process, sometime between proofreading and distribution. The process is easy and inexpensive and helps to protect you in case someone uses your work without permission. Register here: www.copyright.gov.

Publishing Resources

- Kim Bookless, publishing consulting, copyediting, and proofreading services kimbookless.com
- Bethany Brown, The Cadence Group, publishing project management services thecadencegrp.com
- Gwyn Snider, GKS Creative Services, book design services gkscreative.com
- Chicago Self-Publishing Group meetup.com/chicago-self-publishing
- Jane Friedman's publishing website and blog janefriedman.com
- IBPA publishing service provider database ibpa-online.org/search/custom.asp?id=4345
- ALLi self-publishing service ratings selfpublishingadvice.org/self-publishing-service-reviews/



Kim Bookless is a publishing consultant, copyeditor, and proofreader. She and her team help self-publishing authors create bring-to-market strategies for their books and then expertly manage the publishing process from manuscript to finished book, including editing, cover/interior design, printing, and distribution. Contact her at kimbookless.com.