

Self Publishing: The Good and the Better News



Today there are many options available to writers. The traditional publishers face challenges from self-published books, e-publishing and the web. You need to decide what is best for you, and your work.

Once you have written something, you usually want other people to read it, whether that is just friends and family or a wider market. Finding the right place for your work means doing some initial research. These notes apply principally to those writing non-fiction as this is the main area where success is more likely. It is possible to write a novel and self-[publish and sell it on to a mainstream publisher but the odds are considerably against it. Stephen King pioneered fiction writing on the web by offering his new novel in chapter chunk for payment, he abandoned the idea after 3 chapters and if he couldn't make it work it just focuses you on how difficult it can be! If you want to self-publish these are the key questions to ask yourself:

Why do I want to do this?

Is it for the money, to promote my business, to improve my credibility or public profile or to share information?

Do I already have a ready market?

Is there a current mailing list, network established, website sales or a client group or niche market that you have targeted?

How much work am I willing to do?

There is a total input versus cost ratio and the less you want to do, the more it will cost you. Self-publishing involves many different stages and the more you do yourself the more cost-effective it will be.

What form do I want my book to be?

An adobe downloadable file, posted to a website, a printed book that you will distribute and if so how many copies do you want printing? One at a time or do you want to hold stock?

Once you have asked and answered those questions, then it's time to look at what your options really are.

Mainstream Publishing – why not?

I know this is about self-publishing, but it's helpful to know what you are saying no to. This is absolutely the easiest route. You write the synopsis, the publisher give you an advance to write the book (usually a couple of thousand pounds for first time writers of non-fiction), you complete it, hand it over and sit back and wait for the finished book to appear. Then you have all the pleasure of seeing it in the bookshop, if you are lucky and your publisher has excellent sales reps and a great publicity department. That's the good part.

The bad part is it usually takes at least 9 months from acceptance and contract to finished book, and often longer, depending on how long it takes you. One client of mine had a great book idea that a publisher was very keen on, but they wouldn't be publishing it for at least 18 months because it clashed with something they had already got on their list for the coming year. Second problem, you have no control, particularly if this is your first book. They can, and often will, change the title, ask you to rewrite for a specific market, and put a cover on the book that you can't stand. Also, in the current economic climate publishers are publishing fewer books and usually want them tied to a celebrity, a tv programme or an absolutely ground-breaking idea.

The rise and rise of self-publishing

What exactly is self-publishing? It is very simply any piece of work that you produce yourself or take to a printer or on-demand company and it can take several forms: a real book you get to hold in your hand, an e-book that is downloaded, or a 'virtual' book that is printed one copy at a time and sent off from the printer and you don't see it at all. Right now, a record number of people are thinking about, or actually doing self-publishing in some form or another. Their reasons can vary: but the traditional publishing route proves too frustrating for many. Generally you want to write something because you are passionate about it, your idea makes you full of fire and

energy about it, and you generally don't want to hang about waiting on someone else to bring it into the world, and sometimes in a form you don't recognise!

Traditionally self-publishing has had a bad reputation, usually known as 'vanity publishing' it was seen as the only way to get a book printed that a publisher wouldn't touch. Your friends and family may have thought it was terrific but no one else wanted to take a risk on it. This is because, despite what you may think, publishers are not in the literary or educational business, they are in the profit business. Vanity publishing meant you handing over a lot of money for a few books just so you could show you had done it. They usually made very expensive Christmas presents, but now a lot of that has changed, thanks largely to technology, but it doesn't mean that it is all plain sailing.

With self-publishing you can be offered a variety of deals and although there are reputable companies, listed under resources at the end, there are some real sharks. It is up to you to do your research and read your contracts very, very carefully!

The Good

With self-publishing you personally take on the role of the publisher and that means design, finding an ISBN number, typesetting, editing, printing, marketing, advertising and distribution. Many self-publishing houses can offer all, or a pick'n'mix facility, of these essential elements, but remember the more they do the more it will cost you.

The good news is that Amazon, Waterstones, Borders and most major bookshops are having to pay attention to self-published books because it is such a huge growth area. In 2005 Waterstones appointed their first Board Director in charge of self-publishing and W H Smiths are also looking in that direction. The best self-published books with a strong chance of success are those that can appeal to a reasonably wide readership and are specific enough to provide facts and advice they can't find anywhere else. Usually the reader expects useful, practical information that will fulfil their specific needs. That's what the reader wants, but what are the benefits to you as an author?

- Total control of your work and what it looks like. Your vision can be realised and only you get to say what is in and what is out.
- You can focus exclusively on marketing your book and spend as much time and effort as you have available. Conventional publishers are spreading their marketing across a whole range of books and as a 'newbie' you may not get much share of the cake.

- You can target your niche market much more effectively than anyone else and you know exactly how to reach them.
- The length of your book can be up to you, not what suits a publisher's costings which is usually based on the initial print run (usually around 3,000 copies) recovering its costs. You can write a much smaller book, or split your idea into a series.
- Time is on your side. Self-publishing is much, much faster.
- You are not on just a percentage of the profits, or waiting a year for royalties. All profits are yours, less your production costs.
- Self-published books are now more likely to be picked up by conventional publishers so it can also be a way of attracting international as well as mainstream and domestic interest.
- You can offer specialised information that may not easily be available in other ways, easily and quickly. Examples are local information such as restaurant guides, local walks, facilities for children, recipes for specific conditions/interest such as gluten-free or vegan. Any kind of how-to can usually find a market.

The Bad

I can't emphasise enough that you must check, check and check again your work and the kind of contract you are being offered. Experienced, professional authors have been stung, and you don't want to follow their example. You need to know exactly how much your book is going to cost and how many copies they are going to print. Watch out for these:

- Having total control of your work. Yes, I know that was a benefit, but you are not always the best judge of your own work – get some outside feedback and help with your copy for the best result.
- You have to plan carefully your budget of both time and money. Money for production and distribution and the time you are prepared to put into PR, marketing and sales. If you underestimate this, you can be seriously out of pocket, or have very few sales.
- Be wary of a company that is not specific about costs or quantities of books or doesn't fully answer any of your questions. Ask to speak to authors they have previously published, if they refuse, look elsewhere.
- Find out exactly what services they can offer, and if they are part of a package or charged separately. Can you do your own design or typesetting?

If you can you will save money, but be certain you can do a professional job. Nothing looks worse than a badly designed book.

- Ask to see a finished book they have produced so you can judge quality of paper and print. This can be a real eye-opener! Again reputable publishers will be happy to do this for you.

The Ugly

This is where self-publishing has had a bad name. There are companies out there who will fleece you if you let them. Writing is a vulnerable, emotionally-charged area – even if you think you are just churning out a guide to 100 recipes for mongoose, or whatever your chosen subject is, there is always an emotional attachment to your creativity and the expression of it. A dishonest vanity publisher makes money not by selling copies of a book, but by charging clients as much as possible to print an unspecified number of copies of that book. Some vanity publishers will print as few copies as they feel they can get away with. Most will claim to market their publications but may not do so effectively.

Try to stay detached and this is what you have to watch out for:

- CHECK the fine print in the contract. The Society of Authors warned in 2005 of an author who lost her copyright by not doing this. She had the book taken up by a mainstream publisher and then discovered she didn't have rights any longer, they belonged to the publishing house and they didn't even have to pay her a royalty!
- FIND OUT exactly how many copies are included in your quote. You could be asked to pay around £3500 and end up with 10 free copies of your book. That is what one vanity publisher was offering last year. Any more you have to pay for, and usually quite a lot more. By contrast a print on demand contract will usually be around £5-600 and you will get just a few copies initially.

Warning on Vanity Publishing

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I am a great believer in self-publishing as the way forward for many authors, particularly first time writers **BUT** self publishing is not vanity publishing. There is a huge difference and there are many pitfalls if you do not know what you are doing. Private Eye reporter Jane Mackenzie in 2006 exposed yet another vanity publisher and I am repeating her warning here. **Writersworld**, a vanity company owned by Graham Cook, had, at the time of writing a list of county court judgements against it of over £20,000 and there were at least a dozen writers who paid upfront for their book to be published and has not completed.

Mark Quinlan, author of **British War Memorials** has won two court battles against Writersworld owner Graham Cook but has not been paid a penny. [Numerous warnings about Cook have been posted on various writers' forums](#) and he has been reported to Oxfordshire Trading Standards. However he and his company are still trading – *caveat emptor*, you have been warned.

### **E-publishing**

Generally these books are produced as PDF files and it is certainly the quickest and cheapest way to get your book out there. It works well for practical, how-to books but it does rely on your having an effective website or associateships, networks to drive traffic to your site and a payment mechanism such as Clickbank or PayPal. The biggest advantage for many authors though is that you can change your copy at will and update whenever it suits you. You just need to have the professional adobe software or look at a specific program such as PDF Creator which allows you to produce files from any program which has a printable output. You will find them at [www.pdf-creator.net](http://www.pdf-creator.net)

### **Why eBooks?**

Information at your fingertips. That was the promise of the internet and it is becoming more of a reality as readers and publishers begin to embrace the idea of instantly downloadable e-books as a standard.

### **What were the drawbacks?**

- *Trust:* The low barrier to entry - to create and start selling an eBook immediately - has attracted some less-than-honest individuals out to make a quick buck without providing true value. In many cases it's hard to believe some of their hyped up claims and to know if your book will arrive or be as

good as they say once you've paid money. That's why we offer a 30 day guarantee - even on eBooks.

- *Toilet Paper:* Many people read books in all kinds of unusual places; on the loo, in the bath, on the bus etc. Not the most practical places to take your laptop or palmtop.
- *Revision:* Many people like to scribble notes in their books so they can review the key points more quickly in the future. But, in fact, eBooks make the process of note taking and revision even easier.

Now, we've seen what may have stopped you in the past here are just a few reasons why e-books could be right for you now:

- *Speed:* No delays - download your eBook instantly! If it's information you want and you want it now then getting instant access is a real benefit. Some niche books may only be produced in small numbers meaning long delays if your only choice is print.
- *Niche Books:* Publishers can work on smaller margins making niche or otherwise economically unviable books available to people who want them. This increases your ability to find good content that mainstream publishers wouldn't otherwise produce.
- *Safe:* You can back it up - to CD or another computer without worrying about losing or damaging it.
- *Space:* If you buy and read many books in a year you'll soon find your personal space shrinking as your book collection grows. eBooks don't take up physical space.
- *Portable:* If you like to take your books with you, you can use your palmtop or if you're low-tech you can print out portions of the book for reading away from the screen without worrying about damaging the original. If you have various books you need to refer to then eBooks can save a lot of space and weight – it's a library on the move.
- *Quicker Research/Revision:* You can "search" the book using the search feature which saves hours scanning.
- *For Tree Lovers:* Paper is lovely but traditional books require a lot of trees and ink.

### **What are the benefits?**

You can get good information on specific topics/interests that big publishers just won't be interested in.

- Save space on your bookshelf, and save trees
- Instant buying and access – no waiting for delivery
- Many people work from home offices these days and if not they're probably travelling all over the place instead. So eBooks enable you to cart round a whole library on your hand-held.
- You can perform CTRL+F in eBooks when looking for keywords, phrases or concepts which can save hours when researching stuff.
- If you have Acrobat you can add little post-it notes to a file making your eBook a living, growing, valuable piece of research.
- If you prefer to scribble notes or complete the exercises on the page you can print the really useful stuff, like useful list, contacts or tips. You can also print just that page and stick it on a wall. And if there are parts to fill in you can print just those pages and complete them without damaging the book.

If you want it now and you want the flexibility of being able to search, backup and print only the portions of your book you want then why not give eBooks a go?

### **The practicalities**

For a book to be genuinely self-published, a name designated by the author as his 'publishing house' must appear on the Copyright Page of the book as 'Publisher'. The book's ISBN number must also be registered by the ISBN Agency to that author as publisher. All the copies of a self-published book are the property of the author to dispose of as he wishes. Any company which charges to publish books under its own name or prints an undisclosed number of copies which it claims are their property is a vanity publisher - whatever it may try and tell you to the contrary.

As I have said, the advantage of self-publishing in any form is that you can choose the length, and style, but there are some basic guidelines.

- Length can be between 5-10,000 words. A more usual length for a non-fiction book from a publisher is between 30,000-70,000 words.
- Make it easy on the reader with line spacing of at least one and a half, as well as making the book seem more substantial it will be easier to digest.
- Try to use a typeface of 12 point and something conventional, not so unusual so that people feel comfortable and familiar with it.

- On average use 'newspaper style' sentences of between 10-15 words. These are easy to absorb, and you can break them up with longer sentences, but again the aim is to make it physically easy on the reader.
- Illustration can help, but make sure it is to a professional standard and reasonably easy to reproduce. It will increase your costs hugely if you have colour illustrations and similarly photographs are best avoided as they need very high quality reproduction and can bump up your costs as you will need a much higher quality of paper.#
- CHECK, check and check again. Facts, obviously but also your style. Are you repetitively using the same word too closely together, does it actually make sense? Don't rely on your own judgement here, get at least two others to read it through for you.

### **What the average self-publishing house offers you**

The benefit of a good self-publishing house is that they take a lot of the worry away from the process – though of course at a price, or even a percentage of the price. They all have their own guidelines as to how they want the book submitted and formatted with margin and page sizes being fixed by them.

Generally they can offer some, or all, of these:

- |                                |                 |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| ✓ Cover design                 | ✓ Illustrations |
| ✓ Typesetting and page design  | ✓ ISBN number   |
| ✓ Editing and proof reading    | ✓ Printing      |
| ✓ Suitable paper choices       | ✓ Barcode       |
| ✓ Advice on size/style of book |                 |

Some will also offer help with marketing, placing a book on Amazon for instance, promotion and distribution. As an example, a print on demand house Fast-Print is currently offering 50 books with 100 pages delivered to your door £169.50.

However, I used them recently for a business book I had ghost written for a client and the cost was £289 plus £20 delivery for 100 copies of a 114 pages, so it is variable and you need to shop around for the best deal for your particular book.

### **Check out the competition:**

Get familiar with what's out there, so regularly check the shelves for new publications at large bookshops, and keep running a check on Amazon for books in your field – particularly make sure no one else is using your title!

See the Resources section for more help.

### Last word

If you approach your writing as something that will enhance your life and give pleasure to others, then you have an occupation that will improve your health, help build your business, raise your profile, and inject more interest and passion into your daily life! It can also be a viable form of second income, though beware of thinking that one book alone can make you rich! The Society of Authors estimate that only 5% of their members make a living solely from writing and for every J K Rowling there are many more who also have full or part time jobs to supplement their income.

However, you could be the exception, particularly if you are going to use your book as a platform for a career as a speaker, consultant or workshop leader.

Please do contact me if I can be of any further help. I offer individual coaching and editorial help as well as teleclasses to get you started and help you complete your book ready for a publisher.

I am always happy to hear your comments, or answer your questions. Please email me via my website at [www.catalystonline.co.uk](http://www.catalystonline.co.uk) and if you are stuck on getting started, then sign up at the website for my Catalyst Newsletter and you will get a free report on how to overcome creative blocks and barriers.

Best wishes,

**AnnA**

[www.catalystonline.co.uk](http://www.catalystonline.co.uk)

**PS – keep reading for some great resources!**

## Resources:

These are for you to make an initial exploration of what is available. The companies here are reputable and most offer a free publishing guide and often costings are available on their website. Obviously there are lots more, but these will give you a feel for the market.

### Self-publishing/print on demand

- Authors online for those with good technical knowledge who can produce print-ready files. No set up fee, minimum order 30 books, download a template from their website Tel: 0800 107 2423 [www.authorsonline.co.uk](http://www.authorsonline.co.uk)
- Lulu for just one copy or hundreds [www.lulu.com/uk](http://www.lulu.com/uk) - no phone contact only 'live' messaging which isn't always satisfactory
- Fast-Print for UK based service, no minimum order. Tel: 01733 237867 <http://www.fast-print.net/> Offer full service including design and have good templates and stock covers
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- Author House [www.authorhouse.co.uk](http://www.authorhouse.co.uk) Telephone 0800 1974150

### E-publishing

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WBD Publications 01935 424736 [www.wbdpublications.co.uk](http://www.wbdpublications.co.uk)

### **FREE non-fiction synopsis outline for publishers**

If you are submitting to a mainstream publisher, or to help you clarify your thoughts about your book, then filling in this template that publishers use can help enormously. You will find it under the Creativity Tab on my main website at [www.catalystonline.co.uk](http://www.catalystonline.co.uk) and if you want help with it, then contact me via the website.

