DIVING INTO SELF-PUBLISHING?

here are ten questions to ask before taking the plunge.

The world of self-publishing can seem overwhelming to new initiates. Where and how does an author find that first foothold in the book market? If you are considering whether or not self-publishing is for you, consider asking yourself the following ten questions.

I. Why choose self publishing?

The advent of self-publishing has changed the world of traditional publishing, and authors are turning to self-publishing in record numbers. Why?

Control

Authors have historically had little influence over the fates of their books. In traditional publishing, editors and agents decide if a book is print worthy, and the publishing firm determines the book’s cover art, layout, and price point. When authors hand over their manuscript to a traditional publishing company, they surrender control over its future. On the other hand, when authors choose to self-publish, they remain in charge. They choose when their manuscripts are ready, and they control the final outcome.

Quality

Print on demand (POD) books have come a long way in the years since digital printing technology was first developed. These days, printing on demand allows authors to choose from among a variety of formatting options not otherwise available through traditional means, and the product quality is superb. Many self-publishing companies offer a variety of services to POD customers, including professional editing and cover design, to better ensure that authors publish the best books possible, of the highest quality available.

Speed

Publishing a book can take many years. Writing manuscripts, sending query letters, and agonizing over long silences from agents and publishers—all of these used to be regular features of authors’ lives, and all of these had to happen before a book made it through the jungle of traditional publishing and into bookstores. Self-publishing, by way of contrast, shortens those years to a few months, or even weeks. Authors don’t have to wait to see their books in print, and they don’t have to watch those books lose their relevance to current affairs and current reader interests.

Diversity

Ordinarily, publishing books is about making money. Editors look for books that they know will storm the market, selling vast quantities in order to offset printing costs. They look for books that appeal to as many people as possible, and inadvertently shape the market itself, stocking retailers with hundreds of books that all look and feel similar. Self-publishing allows authors to write for niche markets, and to publish books that cater to audiences who appreciate diversity, singularity, and novelty.
II. How much does self-publishing cost?

The many answers to this question vary greatly, depending on the individual author’s goals and budget. There is no one-size-fits-all price for self-publishing, but there are a few factors that all authors should keep in mind while weighing the costs.

A book is an investment

The money authors spend on self-publishing isn’t simply an expense; it’s an investment. By dedicating money to publication, an author creates a book that has value and will earn a profit. Some authors have goals other than earning a profit, but most publishing ventures are business ventures. Remember the line “You have to spend money to make money”? It applies to the world of self-publishing as much as it does to investment banking.

A book is a product

A book is more than numbers on a cost-benefit analysis. Whether published digitally or in print, a book is a product, a physical artifact weighed by human hands and eyes. Research shows that readers decide within eight seconds whether or not to invest energy into a book, and this means that a customized cover design and a clean, professionally edited manuscript may be key factors in a reader’s decision to purchase that book. Paying for a beautiful cover and perfect lines means more readers will stop browsing and pull your book out of the hundreds on the same shelf or webpage—and it means they will keep reading once they do.

Plan on making a profit

It’s easy to focus on how much a book is going to cost now, rather than how it can make money in the future. Profitable books require solid marketing plans, just as a new business requires advertising. Just as television advertisements remind customers that a restaurant exists and sells a dish that they want or need, authors’ platforms or marketing plans help spread the word that their books are out there and desirable.

The average up-front cost range for self-publication falls somewhere between $2,500 and $3,500. This allows roughly $1,500 for a publishing package with a custom cover design, and $500 to $1,000 for professional copyediting, as well as $500 to $1,500 for marketing services. Some authors spend more money than others. The key to successful self-publishing is for authors to consider the value of their investments carefully, in light of their goals, needs, and plans when setting up a budget.

III. What is an ISBN?

An International Standard Book Number (ISBN) is a unique designation, like a Social Security number, that helps book purchasers identify your book. Every book published as of January 1, 2007 has an ISBN thirteen digits long. Prior to 2007, ISBNs were shorter, only ten digits long. While it is not necessary for all books to display an ISBN, many bookstores will not sell books that do not, so it is important that every book carry a printed ISBN.

The method for creating and registering ISBNs may not be necessary for every self-published author to understand, but it is important that authors ensure their books get them. The exact steps may vary depending on the publisher of choice, but many already include ISBNs in their self-publishing packages. Check to ensure each book will receive an ISBN and that the publisher will handle the details of this process. This is, in the end, one of the greatest benefits of using a full-service self-publishing company.
IV. What should I avoid?

Authors occasionally make mistakes that can prove detrimental to their success in self-publishing. Avoiding these five errors will ensure a book navigates the publication process with ease.

**Designing the interior yourself**

Authors are not always gifted book designers. Leaving this task to the professionals allows more time for writing and promotion.

**Using pre-formatted covers**

Judging a book by its cover is a time-honored practice, so creating an eye-catching, professional, quality cover is essential. Most of the pre-formatted cover options available are simply generic, and using one will result in a book cover that resembles every other product on the market. These pre-formatted covers may be conventional, or they may be available as prototypes and mock-ups. Choose wisely, and consider the benefits of paying for a quality product. A book with a custom, professionally designed, and dynamic cover will never get lost in the white noise of retail.

**Editing your own work**

Even the best writers need external input when it comes to copyediting. It’s simply too easy to miss mistakes, in part because, like everyone else, writers are too familiar with their own work to see either its strengths or its flaws clearly. Using friends, relatives, coworkers, and even fellow writers as early readers may be of some use, but this task requires professional assistance. Pay for top-notch editing services.

**Skipping the back cover**

One of the first things an author must produce in the self-publication process is a synopsis and author biography for the back cover. A last-minute synopsis does no book any justice. Remember: the average reader takes only seconds to decide if a book is worth purchasing, so the back cover is vitally important.

**Rushing the process**

Self-publishing is a rapid process in comparison to traditional publishing, but even a few months can seem like forever. Don’t rush a book. Let it simmer, and let the book’s flavors ripen on the vine. Producing a quality book, with an attractive cover and elegant pages, takes time and care. Be involved, but not impatient, and invest that nervous energy in creating a book worth being proud of.

V. Which is better, paperback or hardcover?

There are benefits and drawbacks to each kind of book, whether hardcover or paperback. The self-publishing process allows for authors to pick one or the other or even both, and each kind appeals to different types of buyers.

**Paperbacks**

Paperback books are cheaper, easier to travel with, and appeal to the majority of buyers for these reasons. When presented a hardcover and paperback edition of the same book in stores, readers will often choose the paperback. They are less durable than hardcover books, however, and lack some of the collectable draw of hardcovers.

**Hardcovers**

Hardcover books are durable, look good on display, and make great gifts, especially if autographed. For visual appeal, there’s nothing quite like a stack of hardcover books at signings, speaking events, and conferences. They are more expensive to produce, however, and are less transportable than an e-reader or paperback.
VI. What do I need to know about copyediting?

Authors spend weeks, months, or maybe even years working on their books. By the time they begin thinking about self-publication, they have usually read and revised their manuscripts several times already. So when is it the right time to move the manuscript forward into print? The answer, usually, is to wait just a little while longer, and to consider professional copyediting first. Even the most polished authors and the most insightful early readers miss crucial editorial errors, and every author should consider professional copyediting to ensure a book is taken seriously. There are three primary reasons why this is the case.

**Copyediting is more than proofreading**

With a few exceptions, most books must adhere to the guidelines set forth by the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS). Certain books, including medical or scientific publications, adhere to other specialized guidelines. The CMS guidelines dictate specific ways in which everything—from numbers, to hyphens, to context-specific spellings, to literary allusions and references—must be carried out.

Careful attention to CMS guidelines will ensure that a book feels consistent and reads smoothly. If an author uses the word “e-mail” in chapters one through three, and it is spelled “email” in chapters four through eight, a reader who is paying attention will notice—and perhaps even be annoyed. Other errors in continuity, such as a character’s appearance, habitual gestures, or geographical location can be even more difficult to track.

Proofreaders may find obvious errors such as spelling mistakes and typos, but they won’t be looking for the larger errors a copyeditor will find. Investing money in a professional copyeditor is money well spent.

**Self-editing is never enough**

Authors will always be their own harshest critics, in both good ways and bad ways—but they cannot step outside of their own work in a truly objective way, to see clearly both a book’s strengths and flaws. Authors often become so familiar with their manuscripts that they overlook many mistakes that a pair of fresh eyes will find, and they may also become so obsessed with the flaws they do know of that they are paralyzed from making truly effective changes.

It is also worth noting that not every author has the skills to perform a thorough copyedit. Copyeditors are highly trained specialists for good reason. Many full-service self-publishing companies keep copyeditors on staff; they may be found by recommendation or through reputable websites online.

**Flawed books are not taken seriously**

Even books picked up by top publishing houses and well-known authors occasionally contain errors. It is impossible for every writer and every editor to catch every error, but professionally copyedited books are almost one hundred percent error-free. If a book is riddled with typos and continuity problems, readers and booksellers will not take it seriously.

Self-published authors are often subject to even harsher criticism than authors published through traditional means, as self-publishing is a younger enterprise. All authors, however, must prove to their readers and critics alike that they value their own books. They do this by making sure their books look, feel, and read professionally, and by hiring a professional copyeditor to review their books before publication.

Most self-publishing companies offer professional copyediting services. If not, there are many resources online to find copyeditors, and many published writers will recommend copyeditors they have used in the past. Whatever the case, the positive impact a thorough copyeditor may have on a book is incalculable.
VII. What do I need to know about copyright laws?

One of the most confusing topics for new authors is how to handle copyright laws. There are six key questions about copyrights to keep in mind when seeking self-publication.

Is my manuscript copyrighted if I self-publish?
Yes. The copyright for written material is secured as soon as it is created, or when it becomes fixed in a manuscript for the first time. No publication, registration, or any other official act is required to secure the copyright for a book.

If copyright is automatic, why then should I register for it?
Filing with the U.S. Copyright Office creates a public record of the basic information in a book, which gives authors the right and ability to sue for infringement and statutory damages. Registration creates a legal presumption that a book’s copyright is valid and allows authors to recoup up to several thousand dollars, and possibly even attorney fees, without having to prove actual monetary harm.

How do I know if something in my book is copyright protected?
In most cases, any picture, material, text, information, quote, map, data set, song, image, or illustration that was not specifically created by the author is copyright protected by the person or persons who did create or publish the material. Any text or pictures found in a book, magazine, or newspaper is copyright protected by the publisher, artist, photographer, or some other entity. Most information found on the internet is also copyright protected. Even Wikipedia is an unsafe source; most of its information is copyrighted because it is sourced from elsewhere.

What is “Fair Use”?
Under fair use, some copyright protected material can be used without permission; however, there are no clear-cut rules under fair use, only guidelines and factors to be considered. The following four factors are used to determine fair use:

1. the purpose and character of the use, including potential commercial gains,
2. the nature of the original copyrighted work,
3. the proportion or percentage of the copyrighted material in relation to the work as a whole, and
4. the potential effect on the value of the copyrighted material.

Fair use is not a right, only a defense. If unsure whether certain material falls under fair use, consult a legal advisor or copyright researcher.

Will citing my sources free me from copyright infringement?
No. Citing the source will not avoid possible court litigation. Permission must be obtained. Plagiarism—not citing a source—and copyright infringement share some characteristics, but they are not the same thing.

What is libel, and how can I avoid being accused of libel?
Stating an opinion is not libelous, but authors must exercise care not to make accusatory statements about anyone when using real names. Do not make statements like the following, as they are clear grounds for a successful libel case:

• falsely accusing someone of a crime, or of having been charged, indicted, or convicted of a crime;
• falsely identifying someone with an infectious disease
• falsely charging a person or an organization with a claim that discredits a business or office and lowers their profitability, and
• falsely accusing someone of being impotent.

When publishing true stories or nonfiction, authors may choose to change the names of their characters or the places they describe. They may also choose to use pen names.
VIII. Should I create my own cover?

Whether self-publishing authors choose to use print-ready covers they have created themselves or hire professional graphic designers to create their covers for them often depends on the resources they have available. As with any self-publishing decision, there are benefits and drawbacks to each option.

**Self-creation**

Creating a beautiful cover on one’s own is possible, if the author has the skills, software, and determination to do so. Foregoing a professional design saves money, but often packs a hidden cost: many booksellers and even readers expect specific details in the format and design of a book cover, including the ever-important back cover with its synopsis, biography, advance reviews, and ISBN or barcode information, if applicable. If a cover is bland or unappealing, the book may not sell well—no matter how excellent its content. A book is a kind of semi-public artifact, and a product, and when readers decide to purchase a book they are deciding on more than what to read for the next day or couple of days. They are deciding what company to keep, and what they want other people to know about them. They are deciding who they want to be.

**Hiring a designer**

When authors hire graphic designers, they can expect a great book cover every time, and paid designers have many incentives to create masterpieces for their customers. To a designer, a satisfied customer means more recommendations, and more jobs in the future. There are so many options that narrowing them down to a final decision may prove difficult; authors can design their own covers, hire a freelance artist or graphic designer, or choose to purchase a self-publishing package that includes professional cover design. Often, choosing to go with a professional opens up more options, as authors can tell the designer exactly what they want as opposed to feeling limited by their own skill level. Many self-publishing companies offer a custom cover option, a choice which may save authors the time and stress of finding reputable and skillful designers themselves.

Book covers are not just ancillary details to self-publishing success. They have an enormous impact on who sees a book, who sells it, and ultimately who buys it. People do judge books by their covers, and that’s a fact that can be both a friend and ally to savvy self-publishing authors—authors who are willing to invest the time, money, and energy into making sure their books look professional.

IX. How important is a back cover synopsis?

Consider the case of an author who has just finished writing her book, and can’t wait to share it with readers. How does she convince them that the book is worth reading? One of the most powerful ways to lure in readers, to make sure that they don’t put your book back down once they pick it up, is to write a compelling back cover synopsis.

Think about what happens when a person walks into a bookstore. Readers might be looking for new books in a particular genre, or they might just browse the entire store for eye-catching titles or book covers. What happens when they see something they like? Most often, they pull that book off of the shelf and turn it over to read the synopsis, that little blurb on the back cover that describes the themes, plot, or content of the book. That synopsis, only one or two paragraphs long, has a profound influence on whether readers carry the book to the check-out counter or return it to the shelf.
There is another factor to consider: the way we buy books has changed a lot in the last decade. Online retailers sell as many if not more books as the big chain retailers, and search engines do a lot of our book-hunting for us. Readers don’t tend to browse aimlessly through unfamiliar books as often online as they do on their feet in a neighborhood bookstore, but they do tend to use keywords. When looking for something new, readers enter keywords into a search engine—book titles, genres, author names, product descriptions—and the website’s algorithm produces a list of books that match the criteria. Again, something eye-catching pops up. What do readers do next?

Most often, readers enact the digital equivalent of picking up a book and turning it over. That is, they probably click on the book and read the description—and the description is usually the same text that appears on the back cover of a book. Just as happens in a neighborhood bookstore, this text directly influences a reader’s choice to buy the book.

The synopsis is a vital component of a book’s design, marketability, and success. Therefore, it is essential for every author to take the time to write a compelling and professional back cover synopsis before sending a book out into the world.

X. What do I need to know about formatting?

Choosing the proper format for a book can prove overwhelming. Format variants are more important than authors often imagine. Clear, consistent formatting creates a page that is both visually appealing and functionally easy to read. When formatted properly, every book should feel familiar and fresh. Every self-publishing author should consider these seven questions, among others:

1. should I double-space or single-space my lines?
2. should I indent and/or leave an extra line between paragraphs?
3. should I include headers and footers on every page?
4. should I number my pages in a particular way?
5. should I set my page margins at one inch or less?
6. should I use a particular typeface or font size?
7. what elements, other than the book content itself, should I include?

Luckily, not every author needs to become an expert in book formatting to create a professionally formatted book. Many full-service self-publishing companies will work with you to ensure that your book looks exactly how you want it to, and is consistent in all of its formatting, before it is printed.

All authors ought to know the answers to these questions in order to set themselves up for a successful, enjoyable self-publishing experience. We at Outskirts Press are confident that you will benefit from one of our many publishing packages, and are eager to answer any questions you might have about the materials included in this publication, our services, and what comes next as you take steps towards reaching publication.
Choosing a self-publishing company poses the same challenges as every other important life decision. Analysis can get you only so far before you have to make a final decision, and sometimes that decision is based on something other than pure logic.

Do you have questions, or are you ready to get started? At Outskirts Press, we’re here to help!

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