

Publishing Options

How to Choose the Best Method for Publishing Your Book

By Michael J. Dowling
with Carol White

About the Author

Michael J. Dowling is a ghostwriter and editor who helps individuals and organizations write and publish books and white papers to advance their ideas and enhance their reputations.

If you want to succeed in a creative field these days, you'd better be good at something else besides the creativity or you're not going to make it... Writers need to start thinking less like writers and more like businesspeople.

Peter Bowerman, author
The Well-Fed Self-Publisher

So you've decided to write a book. How do you plan to publish it? Are you going to look for a traditional publisher, self-publish, or use a subsidy publisher? It's wise to make this decision early in the writing process.

Due to advances in printing technology and the advent of the Internet, the publishing landscape is changing rapidly and dramatically. The lines between publishing, printing, distribution, and retailing are becoming increasingly blurred. For example, Amazon.com, which started as a book retailer, now also provides printing, self-publishing, and traditional publishing services.

New technologies, such as e-books and POD (print on demand), increase the complexity of the decision-making process. Today authors must sort through a multitude of options that were unavailable a mere five years ago.

Largely as a result of these changes, self-publishing is ascending in popularity and acceptance. Traditional publishers are being challenged to adapt to the new realities.

This paper focuses on the *business* of publishing rather than the *technology* of publishing. In spite of all of the changes mentioned above, traditional publishing, self-publishing, and subsidy publishing continue to be the three primary business models available to authors. This paper briefly describes the advantages and disadvantages each, so you can make an informed decision.

Traditional Publishing

You're no doubt familiar with traditional publishing (sometimes called "royalty publishing"). Under this arrangement, the author seeks out a publisher, often with the help of an agent. Once the author's manuscript has been accepted, the publisher will handle the duties and pay the bills associated with publication and distribution. The author receives royalties, generally in the range of 6 to 10 percent of the book's sales revenues.

The names of a few of the large New York-based traditional publishers are familiar to all of us. But authors should not overlook the hundreds, even thousands, of very fine mid-size traditional publishers, many of whom have outstanding reputations and excellent penetration of niche markets.

The prestige enjoyed by the published author is unparalleled in our society. A book can bring recognition, wealth and acceleration in one's career.

Dan Poynter, Author
Dan Poynter's Self-Publishing Manual

Advantages of traditional publishing:

- Little or no upfront money is required from the author. In fact, traditional publishers usually pay the author an advance on royalties, so you could have some income even before any of your books are sold.
- This approach provides the author with more prestige and credibility than the other options (although this advantage has diminished somewhat in recent years as self-publishing has increased in popularity and respectability).
- A traditional publisher's established distribution channels are often the most significant benefit. However, this advantage will decrease in importance as the industry embraces e-books.
- Because a traditional publisher provides turnkey services, the author need not learn about the publishing process (although some knowledge is advisable).

Disadvantages of traditional publishing:

- Traditional publishers are reluctant to take risks with unknown authors. Unless your book has big sales potential and you have a significant platform (name recognition, professional position, or other asset that gives you visibility and credibility with your target audience), you may have difficulty finding a traditional publisher. In fact, after spending quite a bit of time searching, you could come up empty handed.

- Many traditional publishers accept only agented submissions, and securing an agent can be as difficult as securing a publisher.
- It requires more time, sometimes two years or more, to publish a book through a traditional publisher.
- Unless your book is a spectacular success, you won't get rich on the royalties you receive. In fact, you won't receive any additional monies until your book has earned enough royalties to offset your advance. That's why some established writers are turning down offers from traditional publishers in favor of self-publishing.
- Because the publisher owns the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) assigned to your book, you must give up substantial control. If the publisher makes decisions you don't agree with (cover design, marketing approach, etc.), or if it does a poor job marketing your book, you have little recourse.
- If your book sells poorly within the first six months, the publisher may take it out of print. You won't be able to do anything with it until the rights revert to you, which could take years.
- You will probably have to pay significantly more than the printing cost to purchase your books for your own use (e.g., to sell books in the back of the room at your talks and seminars).
- You won't have the ability to do custom printings for particular clients. At speaking engagements and other events, it's becoming increasingly popular for authors to print special editions with the host company's name and other information on the cover, and perhaps a letter from the CEO inside. What's more, you also won't have the authority to produce your own collateral material, such as bookmarks, sell sheets, CDs, posters, and advertising specialty items.

More and more authors are opting to go solo, creating their own publishing houses. Why—simply this: It's about quality; it's about timing' it's about control; and it's about money.

Briles, Frishman & Kremer,
co-authors
Show Me about Book Publishing

Self-Publishing (also called “Independent Publishing”)

If you have between \$5,000 and \$15,000 available to pay for the production and distribution costs of your book, and you’re willing to invest time and effort to learn about the publishing process, setting up your own publishing company may be your best option.

Advantages of self-publishing:

Today self-publishers must sort through a multitude of options that were unavailable a mere five years ago. Largely as a result of these changes, self-publishing is ascending in popularity and acceptance. Traditional publishers are being challenged to adapt to the new realities.

- Self-publishing gives you complete control over your book. Since you own the ISBN, you get to make all editorial, design, and business decisions.
- It’s the fastest way to get your book to market. However, even with self-publishing, it’s wise to allow a year or more. Rushing the publication process can result in inferior product quality, poor promotion, and inadequate distribution.
- Since you get to keep all of the revenues, this route over time could give you the best return on your investment.

Disadvantages of self-publishing:

- This option requires the most up-front money.
- You will need to invest a substantial amount of time and effort to learn about the publishing process. Fortunately, there are many good books available that will teach you what you need to know. Alternatively, if you want to delegate some of these publishing chores, you hire a book shepherd (also called a book packager or a book developer) to guide you through the process.
- Since you are essentially in business for yourself, you will need to devote considerable time to setting up distribution channels, marketing your products, keeping records, and performing other operational duties. The Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA) is a valuable resource for people who want to take their publishing companies to higher levels of excellence.
- As a publishing “entrepreneur,” you are positioned for greater rewards, but you also are exposed to greater risks.

Subsidy Publishing

Subsidy publishing (sometimes called “vanity publishing”) occupies the middle ground between traditional publishing and self-publishing. Like traditional publishers, subsidy publishers accept submissions from authors, handle all aspects of publication (plus distribution in most cases), and pay royalties based on sales.

Unlike traditional publishers, however, subsidy publishers charge authors for their services. In fact, the majority make most of their money not on sales of the author’s book to the public, but on sales of the author’s book to the author.

In a 2006 article in the *Times* (Great Britain), the founder of subsidy publisher Lulu stated that the company’s goal is “... to have a million authors selling 100 copies each, rather than 100 authors selling a million copies each.”

Advantages of subsidy publishing:

- It’s easy to find a subsidy publisher. Although some attempt to portray themselves as highly selective so as to appear more like traditional publishers, most eagerly accept submissions.
- Less upfront cash is required than for self-publishing, because subsidy publishers underwrite (subsidize) a significant portion of the production costs (cover design, interior layout, printing, etc.).
- The turnkey book production services offered by subsidy publishers are a benefit if you don’t have the time or desire to learn about the self-publishing process.
- The established distribution networks and marketing programs of some subsidy publishers can be an asset.
- Subsidy publishers typically pay royalties to the author at higher percentage rates than traditional publishers, and they generally bring books to market faster.

Disadvantages of subsidy publishing:

- Some subsidy publishers produce books of inferior quality using standard templates and sloppy workmanship.
- Important aspects of the publishing process may be out of your control. For instance, the subsidy publisher frequently

establishes the book's selling price. If the price is set too high for effective sales, the author suffers.

- If you want copies of your book to sell at speaking engagements or for other purposes, you must buy them from the subsidy publisher, often at prices considerably in excess of printing costs.
- Although many subsidy publishers will promise to sell your book to the general public, the results may be disappointing. Often their marketing services are cookie-cutter approaches that are less effective than custom services you could arrange on your own.
- Subsidy publishers have a very difficult time getting reviews from industry sources like *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, and major newspapers. The word is out that the quality of some subsidy publishers is not up to standard. It may not be fair for the media to paint all subsidy publishers with this broad brush, but some may adopt this approach as a convenient way to cull a manageable number of books from the thousands that are published each year.
- After enticing aspiring authors to pursue their dreams with promises about marketing and other services, a few subsidy publishers will pull a bit of a "bait and switch" by adding additional costs to the project and renege on some promises.
- The ISBN assigned to your book will belong to the subsidy publisher, not to you. If you want to change publishers, you will need to get a new ISBN. Changing ISBNs can cause confusion and hurt sales.
- If you're unhappy with the subsidy publisher you've chosen, the terms of your contract may make it difficult for you to go elsewhere. To further lock in authors, some publishers put watermarks on every page of the PDF files so they're not useable by others, and they refuse to release artwork.

If you follow the tips in this book, and your book takes off through your marketing efforts, you can pull it from the self-publishing (i.e., subsidy publishing) company and publish it on your own (and keep 100% of the profits) or shop it around to agents and traditional publishers.

Mark Levine, author
The Fine Print of Self-Publishing

Recommended Reading

Below are some excellent books that can help you with your publishing decision:

- *Dan Poynter's Self-Publishing Manual: How to Write, Print and Sell Your Own Book*. Now in its 20th printing, this book has been an industry standard for almost thirty years.
- *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing: Everything You Need to Know to Write, Publish, Promote, and Sell Your Own Book* by Marilyn Ross & Sue Collier. Also an industry standard, with sales of more than 100,000 copies.
- *The Well-Fed Self-Publisher: How to Turn One Book into a Full-Time Living* by Peter Bowerman. An excellent book about self-publishing, with emphasis on marketing.
- *A Self-Publishers Companion* by Joel Friedlander. Sound advice about self-publishing, including e-books and social networking.
- *The Publishing Game: Publish a Book in 30 Days* by Fern Reiss. Step-by-step instructions from a highly respected authority about how to self-publish your book.
- *Book Design and Production* by Pete Masterson. This highly regarded book will help you understand the book production process and the principles of good cover and interior design.
- *The Fine Art of Self-Publishing* by Mark Levine. The author pulls no punches as he discusses in detail the pros and cons of 45 subsidy publishers. For example, he names Author House, iUniverse, and Xlibris as “publishers to avoid.”
- *Show Me about Book Publishing: Survive and Thrive in Today's Literary Jungle* by Judith Briles, Rick Frishman and John Kremer. Provides helpful advice about how to navigate through the shifting landscape of modern publishing.

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Michael J Dowling produces clear, concise, creative, and convincing books, white papers, and other print communications for individuals and organizations. He specializes in ghostwriting, editing, book shepherding, and self- publishing.

Mike's clients include successful business leaders, executive coaches, professional consultants, entrepreneurs, and other professionals. By offering turn-key services from idea conceptualization to book publication and distribution, he makes the writing and self-publishing process understandable, enjoyable, cost-effective, and time-efficient for his clients,

Mike has an MBA from Columbia Business School, where he was one of three Harriman Scholars. He is the author or ghostwriter of numerous books and articles.

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