



## **What Are My Publishing Options**

*A Guide for Authors and Professionals*

**Abstract:** There are many publishing options available to authors. Which option is best depends on the author's goals, genre, and resources. This paper outlines the publishing options and establishes criteria for authors to judge which option is best for them.

**Intro:** You've worked hard developing your manuscript or book proposal; now its time to decide how you will get your book to market. There are several different options available to professionals. Which one is best for you depends on your career goals, topic, potential market, and resources. This section will address the pros and cons of each option. In the next section we provide a self-analysis that helps you identify which option is best for you.

### **Option One: Traditional Publishing**

The first option is to sell publication rights to a traditional publishing house in exchange for an advance and royalties.

How this process works:

Most traditional publishers do not accept proposals directly from authors. Instead, the author must first secure a literary agent to represent them. An author secures an agent by sending them a query. If the agent is interested, they will ask to look at a proposal. Then, if they like the project, they will offer the author representation in exchange for 10-15% of the author's royalties. This process can take several months.

Unfortunately, securing an agent does not guarantee publication. Although the agent has access to the publishers, the agent must query and court the publisher in the same manner that the author queried the agent. This adds additional time, up to several months, to the total process.

There are several reasons for choosing a traditional publisher:

1. **Credibility:** Traditional publishers have established a solid reputation, which gives authors—especially new authors—automatic credibility in the market.



2. **Distribution:** Traditional publishers have strong relationships with wholesalers and retailers nationally. Furthermore, the agent can sell foreign and language rights, getting the author distribution in additional geographic and language markets.
3. **Small Up-front Costs:** Traditional publishing requires the fewest up-front costs. Usually, the only costs attributed to the author are marketing, though some are encouraged to hire an outside editor or ghostwriter.
4. **Quality:** Traditional publishers screen potential projects, making sure only the best content makes it to the market.

There are also several downfalls to traditional publishing:

1. **Lack of Brand Control:** The author has little to no say in the design and packaging of their project.
2. **Low Royalties and Advances:** First time authors usually receive advances of \$2,000 to \$20,000. Once the advance is earned back, the author begins receiving royalties, which range anywhere from 5-7% for paperback and 10-15% for hardcover (\*\*remember—the agent is also skimming 10-15% off the top of the royalties the author receives). Unfortunately, many authors do not earn back their advances, which in turn may hurt their chances for publishing a second book.
3. **Slow Time-to-Market:** It can take as long as two years to secure an agent and a publisher, and another year for a book to reach the market.
4. **Ownership:** Under this model, authors sell the right to publish their work for a defined period of time. Since the authors sold their publication rights, they have little say in the direction, distribution, or amount of time their book spends in the market. If for any reason the author is dissatisfied, they must either buy back their rights before the agreement ends, or wait for the book to go out of print (at which time rights revert back to them), before they can take it elsewhere.

## Next Steps

If you decide to take this option, the first thing you need to do is start querying literary agents who represent your genre. You can find an agent through the following resources:

- **Association of Author Representatives (AAR):** This organization requires that all members follow a strict ethical code, which is important considering the fact that agents should only make money when you do. Any agent who asks for a reading fee or money up front is not included in this organization.  
<http://aaronline.org/>
- **Guile to Literary Agents (GLA):** This resource is available as both a book and a daily blog. This blog is sponsored by Writer's Digest



and features a different literary agent every day. The blog discusses the types of work the agent represents and their submission guidelines. You can search by genre to locate agents who will represent your work.

<http://www.guidetoliteraryagents.com/>

You may also want to read the following books to acquaint yourself with the agent process:

- **How to Be Your Own Literary Agent: The Business of Getting a Book Published** by Richard Curtis: Written by an agent, this book explains the agent process, contracts, and how to retain creative control over your work.
- **Making the Perfect Pitch: How to Catch A Literary Agent's Eye** by Katherine Sands: Shares tips and pointers from various agents and includes a section on how to do a live and in person pitch.
- **How to Get a Literary Agent** by Michael Larsen: Discusses how to make yourself attractive to agents and how to be a stellar client.
- **The Writer's Digest Guide to Query Letters** by Wendy Burt-Thomas: Discusses the elements of query letters and how to craft one specifically for your genre.

The agent will know which publishing houses to submit your work to. Most often, agents will focus on traditional houses, also known as the Big Six, which include Hachette, Harper Collins, MacMillan, Random House, Penguin, and Simon & Schuster. Each house owns several imprints, each specializing in a different genre or genres. The agent will query the acquisitions editor for the appropriate imprint. During this time you will want to continue to build your platform so you can demonstrate your ability to perform in the market.

## **Option Two: Vanity Publishing**

Vanity publishers will publish any book, regardless of the quality of the content, for a fee. The author pays a large up-front fee to produce the book, and also gives the vanity publisher a 50-75% stake in the sales.

Although a vanity publisher guarantees publication (for a fee), there are many disadvantages:

1. **Poor Quality:** Vanity publishing is known for producing poor quality both in content and in packaging. As a result, most retailers will not carry books published through a vanity house.
2. **High Up-front Costs and Low Return:** Most vanity publishers charge incredibly large sums, especially considering the quality of the work. Also, since they make most of their money up front, vanity publishers have no incentive to insure the success of the book.
3. **Little to No Distribution:** Because of the poor quality both in terms



of content and packaging, very few retailers will carry books published by a vanity press.

4. **Bad Reputation:** Again, because of poor quality, books published through vanity presses are automatically labeled with a stigma, making it difficult to get media attention and retail placement.

### **Next Steps**

If you decide this option works for you, the next step is to locate a vanity publisher who can produce the quality of work that fits your needs under terms you are comfortable with. Examples of vanity publishers include PublishAmerica, LuLu, and others.

### **Option Three: New Technology Publishing**

New technology publishing, including eBooks and print-on-demand (POD), provides authors with additional options. Still, like any options, new technology comes with both pros and cons. First, let's take a look at eBooks:

- Many eBook publishers accept works just like vanity publishers—with little to no criteria. As a result, there is no quality control governing the content published through eBooks.
- Although eBook sales are growing, they still represent only a sliver of the total book market. Thus, eBooks are not viable as the sole method of production for most books.
- Because it is affordable to convert books into eBook format and because there is a steadily increasing demand for this format, many traditional and independent publishers are offering this option in conjunction with their pre-existing publishing services.

While eBooks are available only online or through a reading device, POD materials are created with the intent that they will be published and printed when someone is ready to buy them. Special note—there is a difference between POD publishers and POD Printers. Printers merely print the file, while publishers actually handle the entire process of editorial, layout, and design.

Here are a few things to consider before selecting a POD publisher:

- POD publishers are known for accepting works regardless of quality, which automatically gives POD books a negative stigma among media and distributors.
- POD products are not stocked in major retail outlets. Customers have to order POD titles. Unfortunately, very few consumers are willing to special order a title. They would prefer to order a book already in stock or purchase one through an online retailer such as Amazon.
- The author pays for the formatting and layout, but does not retain the rights to those files. If for any reason the author chooses to take their project elsewhere they will have to pay to have those files reformatted.



As we mentioned earlier, POD printers typically do not offer design, editorial, or other services. Still, POD printers can be of value, especially for those authors who wish to print titles with unknown or limited sales potential. The largest and best know POD printer is Lightning Source. Owned by Ingram, the publishing industry's largest wholesaler, Lightning Source has the ability to make every one of its titles available for special order through bookstores and online. They are an excellent choice for short print runs or for turning around a limited number of copies in a short amount of time. Still, there are a few things to consider;

- If you are planning on a national release and you expect to sell more than a thousand copies, a traditional offset printer will provide you with the lowest cost per unit.
- POD printers are limited in their design and layout options. Traditional printers have more choices.

Just like with eBooks, most traditional and independent publishers have POD technology services available for their authors.

## **Next Steps**

If you are interested in eBook or POD technology, you may either discuss this with your traditional or independent publisher, or you can contact a POD publisher or printer directly. Examples of POD publishers include Outskirts Press, Lulu, Xlibris, and others. POD printers include Lightning Source, A&A Printing, and more. Be sure you do your research to find a service provider with the distribution, design, and reputation standards you need to meet your goals at a reasonable price.

## **Option Four: Self-Publishing**

Self-publishing is growing in popularity, despite the negative stigma sometimes attached to it. Self-publishing, like every other option, comes with its own mix of pros and cons. On the upside, self-publishing gives the author complete ownership and control over content, design, and time-to-market. The author also keeps the total return on the full cover price of all books sold. Still, there are many fallbacks to self-publishing:

- Self-publishers do not have access to a full editorial team and must coordinate all editorial work themselves.
- Designers who work with self-publishers often lack the knowledge to design and format a product that meets strict industry standards, which can hurt distribution.
- Self-publishers do not receive the volume discounts on printing that established publishers do.
- Lack of brand recognition also hurts distribution. Self-publishers can work with a distributor, but again they must do their research carefully to find one that can meet their needs.
- The self-publisher must coordinate the entire project from start to finish as well as handle all marketing and distribution. For the



busy professional trying to build a brand, this can be a huge undertaking.

Again, because anyone with the means can produce a book regardless of quality, self-publishing is viewed as poor quality by media and book retailers. Strong sales as a self-publisher can lead to a deal with a traditional publishing house, but too often it is difficult to break the stigma associated with self-publishing. Before pursuing this option, you must decide if retail distribution and media coverage is important to you.

### **Next Steps**

Before pursuing the self-publishing option, you will want to familiarize yourself with the publishing process. Here are a few resources to help you do that:

- The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing by Tom and Marilyn Ross: This book surveys the entire process from writing to publishing and promoting a book.
- The Self-Publishing Manual by Dan Poynter: This book covers all of the basics, including technical specifications and vendors.
- Self-Publishing for Dummies by Jason Rich: In the spirit of the For Dummies series, this book is a simple introduction to the business of self-publishing, complete with standout graphics.

Next, you will want to identify vendors, editors, and distributors to help you meet your goals. Many are identified in these books and include Amazon CreateSpace, Authorhouse, Lulu, and others.

### **Option Five: Independent and Hybrid Publishers**

The last option available to authors is known as either an independent or a hybrid publisher. These publishers combine the benefits of self-publishing with the distribution power and quality of a traditional publisher. Most independent publishers offer:

- A higher royalty structure of anywhere from 20-35% of the cover price for books distributed through a retailer and 100% of the cover price for books sold directly by the author. This is a good option for authors considering back-of-room sales or including a book in a seminar or speaking package in addition to traditional retail distribution.
- Ownership over the creative process including packaging, branding, and all publication rights including foreign, language, and film.
- Independent publishers maintain a stringent submission process vetting the best clients and projects so that they only handle quality projects. They also provide full editorial and ghost writing services, competitive design, production, and distribution services.
- The time-to-market is relatively short, usually less than a year.



Plus, independent publishers will keep a book in the market beyond the standard 3-6 months allowed by traditional publishers.

- Some independent publishers include marketing packages that enhance and compliment the author's own marketing efforts.

Independent publishers vary in terms of up-front costs. For the most part, because of their adherence to quality and powerful distribution, independent publishers cost more than vanity and self-publishers. Still, they provide competitive quality, credibility, and access to national and specialty retailers, which is a tremendous benefit for those professionals looking to build a national brand.

## Next Steps

If you decide that an independent publisher meets your needs and resources, you will want to begin by pulling together your book proposal and budget. Next you will want to research potential publishers to find one that represents your genre.

Agents do sometimes work with independent and small publishers, though most independent houses work directly with the author. Some well-known independent publishers include Greenleaf Book Group (specializes in nonfiction, primarily business, health, and wellness), Sourcebooks Publishing (specializes in gift book publishing), Chelsea Green (specializes in socially minded topics and politics), and many others. You can find independent publishers through the following resources:

- Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA): A professional association for independent publishers. They host IBPA Publishing University prior to Book Expo every year in New York City <http://www.ibpa-online.org/>.
- Small Publishers Association of North America (SPAN): Supports independent and self-publishers <http://www.spanet.org/>

These websites also offer information on awards and recognition both for individual titles and for publishers. Such information can help you identify quality leaders and which genres they represent.





## How to Choose Which Option is Best for You

Now that you have a basic understanding of the options available, you need to evaluate your skills, goals, project, and budget to determine which option is best for you. The questionnaire below will help:

1. Would you rather:
  - a. Not spend your own money and get paid up front
  - b. Pay just to print in exchange for a moderate return
  - c. Make a reasonable up-front investment for a higher return
2. Would you prefer to:
  - a. Let someone else handle the entire process
  - b. Manage the process yourself
  - c. Retain creative control while working with an experienced team
3. In terms of marketing and sales, are you more comfortable:
  - a. Handling your marketing, but knowing the publisher's credibility will carry you through the distribution chain
  - b. Handling all of your marketing and forgoing retail distribution
  - c. Coordinating your marketing efforts with an organized and strategic campaign through retail and specialty distribution channels while having the option to sell directly
4. In terms of creating content, are you more comfortable:
  - a. Writing it yourself, but working with an editor to finalize it
  - b. Writing and editing it all yourself—I'll hire an editor if I need one
  - c. Writing it yourself, but using the help of a ghost writer or an editor to organize your thoughts and save time
5. When it comes to design, would you rather:
  - a. Leave it to the pros
  - b. Do it yourself
  - c. Have creative control, but work with a skilled designer
6. When it comes to distribution, do you want:
  - a. Access to a traditional distribution chain
  - b. To sell them all yourself
  - c. A combination of traditional distribution and the ability to sell books on your own in return for the full cover price

### Answer Key

Mostly A's: Traditional publishing is probably the best option for you.

Mostly B's: Vanity, new technology, or self-publishing may be best for you.

Mostly C's: An independent/hybrid publisher is likely the best fit.

Regardless of which option you choose to pursue, it is vital that you protect yourself by doing your homework, taking the time to weigh the pros and cons, and analyzing the option's ability to help you meet your short and long-term goals. Publishing a book is a smart and crucial step toward building your brand. Take the time to do it right.





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