

A short guide to self-publishing

So: you want to publish your own book?

You already know that the giant publishing houses reject most submissions; but thanks to the web the era of democratised publishing is upon us. Today it is possible to hire a publisher for around £500 and have your book published. Of course, there are very few JK Rowlings among us, but let's be clear; if you are publishing to make money, you'd be better off doing something else. However, if you have something you are burning to share with the world, then self-publishing might be a good option for you – read on.

In this short guide we'll start with an overview of five types of self-publishing before looking in more detail at some of the more popular self-publishing houses.

Before you begin

Do ask yourself: Is your book worth publishing? Is it a work of quality? Does it have a market?

To improve your book, obtain as much feedback as possible from your potential audience. Family and friends can be good, but they're generally too nice and don't want to hurt your feelings – and strangers may not be kind. Get more than one opinion – different people have different tastes and what works/doesn't work for one may for another. Even awesome writers benefit from editing. Don't make the mistake of thinking you can do this on your own. Skip this step, and your book's quality will be unnecessarily compromised.

You'd be smart to seek out professional editing help too – by hiring a copyeditor or beta reader. Do an online search for beta readers – these are people who will read through manuscripts, without editing, and give feedback. They generally charge – although less than copyeditors. If you do hire a beta reader and/or copyeditor, ensure that they work in the same genre as your book. Do your homework – there are lots of people out there offering services but don't deliver. Be prepared for really frank comments, feedback and input. Use this to understand if your book has a true purpose for existing, and how to improve it.

Five types of self-publishing

As you will see below there are many approaches to self-publishing. Perhaps the important thing to point out is that authors mustn't think only of the traditional approaches or that the publishing world is one of two halves – traditional and self: there are variations between which reinforces the need to do one's homework – word of mouth is very important in this regard.

1. Go your own way: independent self-publishing

- The author handles all aspects of the publishing process and/or contracts out services: everything from editing and design to printing, distribution and fulfillment.
- You'll need to be determined if you opt for this route; most people don't have the time or confidence to successfully navigate all aspects of the publishing process – including marketing.

2. Use a service: self-publishing with help

- The author enters into an agreement with a publishing service to publish the book for a fee. A contract usually stipulates what the author will pay for the service upfront, what that service entails and what the royalty structure on copies sold will be.
- Under these types of agreement, the author will still need to do all the marketing – watch out for offers such as: ‘we’ll promote your book for £X’. It all adds up and all too often has very few returns. Sending 100 tweets is not the same as obtaining 100 sales ...
- Almost all affordable self-publishing options use print-on-demand or short-run digital printing technology.
- Not surprisingly, the lower the cost, the more the author will be expected to do. Some services – particularly those offering e-publishing – are free where the author provides printer-ready files.
- Publishing services vary tremendously in how they edit, design and distribute books. Usually the business model of these services depends on making a profit from the upfront fees, not from book sales, so they are generally keen to sell additional services upfront.

3. 50/50 partnerships

- These arrangements sit between traditional and self-publishing and are relatively new – but could be a growing area.
- They do what they say on the tin – where a publisher works with the author in a 50/50 partnership on all aspects of the publishing process – including the marketing.

4. Create a physical book: traditional print or print-on-demand

- **Traditional print runs** use offset printing – a process that has substantial upfront costs, but a cheap unit cost. It makes sense for higher print runs (of at least 500); but factor in the need to store your stock.
- **Print-on-demand** or short-run digital printing is a popular option for self-publishers, and is also used by traditional publishers to keep titles in print or to rush books to market. It usually has low upfront costs, but high unit costs. Books are printed only when ordered; storage needs are limited.

5. Go Digital: everything from e-books to websites and blogs

- **Option 1:** Author self-publishes work on their own website, blog or social network, and makes it available in any digital format they wish, either viewable on the site or through a download (e.g. a PDF file).
- **Option 2:** Author contracts with an online publishing service to host and sell work in digital formats (anything from a PDF file to an e-book file). Some services can also make a print-on-demand version available. A note on contracts: we strongly recommend that you check contracts with the [Society of Authors](#) (SOA) and would further recommend that all authors join the [Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society](#) (ALCS) once their first book/article is published.

Self-publishing houses

Lulu and Blurb are just two of the many publishers in this new world of self-publishing. At Lulu, for example, binding your first book can be as low as £2.50, plus postage, which can take the per book price to just over £5.00. Blurb has several more features and the costs are a bit higher. But both are legitimate alternatives to the mega-publishers. Remember, these do-it-yourself services are ideal if

you're publishing in small batches, such as a family history for a limited number of relatives.

You will need to have your wits about you as you put in some hard work formatting your manuscript to make it ready for publication. All of the self-publishers will want to be very precise in how you format your work for different book styles (novels, cookbooks etc.) But the really hard work will be getting people to buy what you've written! If you can manage that, you generally retain between 60 and 90% of your sales. These sites take a bit off the top, naturally, but it is enormously cheaper in the long run.

Don't underestimate the amount of work needed to promote your book – be prepared to work hard at it – and to be persistent! And don't forget to crunch the numbers too; the pricing of your book is very important. Don't think that because you can get a book through Lulu for £5 that that's what you would charge for it – even if you do not want to make *any* money there are hidden costs to be factored in, especially if you opt for distribution services such as selling through Amazon and Barnes and Noble etc. – which all of the self-publishing houses do. And, if you are looking to sell on the high street then it's important to keep in mind that booksellers such as Waterstones will want a 40% discount off the retail price – and will require you to use a distributor who will, in turn, want a 60% discount (including the bookshop's 40%). Retail discounts might not be a factor to start with – but you'll certainly get caught out if you don't take it into account early on.

To recap: some of the more popular self-publishing houses are:

- [Blurb](#)
- [Lulu](#)
- [SmashWords](#) (owned by Amazon)
- [CreateSpace](#) (owned by Amazon)
- [Book Country](#) (a Penguin group imprint)
- [Lightening Source](#) (from Ingram Sparks)

Do your homework!

There are many self-publishing scams out there. Have your wits about you. Be sceptical. Use the collective wisdom of the internet to weed out rip-off artists. Check out what publishers (both independent and self) are saying on Twitter – you can learn an incredible amount from other people's experiences this way.

The communications and editorial committee of the URC would love to see more of our church members publishing their own work. So be bold and take the necessary steps to become a self-published author. And when you have created your book do let us know – we'd be happy to consider making it available through the URC's own online store.

*The communications committee
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