

# Self-Publishing Basics

I'm assuming that you are either considering self-publishing, getting ready to self-publish, or approaching that point. If that's *not* the case, and you're just procrastinating, get back to writing. Go, scoot. You can worry about this stuff when you are ready to publish.

While we are on the topic, by “ready to publish”, I mean that your manuscript is finished, you have printed it out, read it, read it aloud, made all the necessary changes, have given it to *at least one* fellow writer for an *objective* critique. I'm assuming they gave it a thorough going over, that you incorporated their suggestions (or batted them away with compelling counter-logic), and they have given the thumbs up to the final version. I'm also hoping that there was at least one point between the last draft and being ready to publish where you let the manuscript sit for a few weeks, so that you could read it with fresh eyes.

Okay, so you're ready. Now you need to turn that unedited manuscript into a professional-looking e-book – meaning you need an editor, a cover designer, and either to learn how to format e-books yourself, or a hire a professional.

## Self-Publishing Service Companies

Before we get into the details, some of you may be tempted to use one of the many self-publishing service companies that have sprung up. In short, avoid. Out of the three main steps - writing, publishing, and marketing - publishing is by far the easiest and these companies will give you no help with writing or marketing. And anyway, the value of the assistance they provide with publishing is questionable. Most of these companies

overcharge for basic services both through a hefty upfront fee, and by taking a big chunk of your royalties.

Avoiding these companies doesn't mean you have to do *everything* yourself; you can hire help at every step along the way, for much more reasonable fees, and with far better results. Finally, you really want to do the actual uploading yourself. Not doing so will mean that your account is in the control of a third party, and they, rather than you, will have access to crucial data such as your live sales figures, and will be telling Amazon where to send the monthly checks. If you really, really must use one of these services (and I really don't think it's necessary), at least go with someone like BookBaby, who only charge a (comparatively reasonable) upfront fee, and don't touch your royalties.

## Networking

The publishing landscape is changing continually; it's essential to keep in touch with developments so that you can exploit opportunities as they arise. The following blogs are must-reads: [Dean Wesley Smith](#), [Joe Konrath](#), and [The Passive Voice](#). [The Creative Penn](#) and [Lindsay Buroker's blog](#) are also highly recommended.

The [Kindle Boards Writer's Cafe](#) is the most popular hang-out for self-publishers - a real mixture of those starting out and those that have already sold tens or hundreds of thousands of books. It's a great place to find editors, cover designers, formatters, artists, and to get advice on all aspects of self-publishing. I have found that the best way to get recommendations for any service provider is to ask a fellow writer.

## Covers

Your book's cover is the face it shows the world. You want to make a good first impression, don't you? A smart, professional cover makes all the difference. People really do judge a book by its cover. I can hear the complaints: this stuff shouldn't matter; it's all about the writing. Look, the world is unfair. Get over it. If you want your book to stand out from the crowd, if you want to send the reader a signal that you have taken as much care with the inside of the book, you better make sure the outside looks good. In short, get a professional to design your cover.

Joel Friedlander has an excellent post on [common mistakes book cover designers make](#), and I have a post here [covering design basics and the process I go through with my designer](#). I recommend reading them both (note: Joel's site has an astonishing number of fantastic posts on all aspects of self-publishing. He also runs [monthly cover design awards](#), providing expert commentary on most entries).

## Editing

This might be where self-publishers skimp most of all. Unfortunately for them, readers will spot the errors straight away. But even if they have eliminated the obvious stuff, such as typos or grammar issues, there may well be deeper problems.

If you aren't planning to hire a professional editor, I strongly urge you to reconsider, and to read [this article on the importance of editing](#), as well as this example of [how much an edit can alter and improve a story](#). The following three post by experienced editors

([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) are also essential reading. I hope we're agreed now that you need an editor. If not, please re-read these posts. Editing is crucial.

When you dip your toe into the indie marketplace, you will notice many editors charging surprisingly low rates. I'm all for a good deal, but I would urge extreme caution here. An editor that is charging \$200 is probably only going to do some quick proofing. Self-publishers get dinged in reviews about editing more than anything else. By employing a qualified, experienced editor to give your manuscript a *real* edit, you will be ahead of the pack.

Every time I get an MS back from my editor, her suggestions have improved the work immeasurably. But *much* more importantly, I learn something. You aren't just investing in your book, but in yourself as a writer. If you don't engage a professional editor, you will regret it. Most readers sample a work first and most e-book retailers allow them to download a chunk for free to decide if they want to buy. The size of the sample is around 10% on Amazon, but can be larger on the other sites.

I know what the main objection will be – price. But you must consider it an investment rather than a cost. If you can't afford it, find a way. Save, barter, [crowdfund](#), agree a payment plan with your editor, give up that diamante-encrusted ham you are so fond of – whatever it takes (although I would draw the line at getting into debt and/or an elaborate heist).

## Formatting

Once your manuscript is edited, and your cover is ready, you will need to turn that into a neatly formatted e-book that will wrap and flow and resize, and have nifty features like a clickable table of contents (and links to your other books). If you don't own an e-reader, and you have never read an e-book, I recommend downloading the [Kindle software](#) so you can play around with it (available for any computer, tablet or smartphone). Grab some free books while you are at it, and look at the formatting. Watch how the text reflows when you make the font bigger and smaller. If it is formatted correctly, it will all be quite neat.

Formatting can be a painful process the first time, but it gets much easier after that. I think my first book took a few days to figure everything out. My next one took a few hours. Now, after four books, I can even format a complicated non-fiction book very quickly. Essentially, it involves downloading some free software and playing around with basic HTML. Some of the most non-technical people I know have been able to master it, but if it's too much, you can hire someone cheaply (for between \$100 and \$200).

What you absolutely mustn't do is use one of the shortcuts that many self-publishers employ. Some of these "tricks" involve simply saving your MS as HTML document then uploading directly to Amazon. I can't emphasize enough what a mistake this is. Your book will most likely contain serious formatting errors. And even if it looks fine on the Kindle, it may not look okay on an iPad or iPhone. Many self-publishers who used this shortcut were surprised when their books were a mess on the new Kindle Fire. I wasn't, as this shortcut will leave all sorts of hidden code in your book that can cause problems

as it is interpreted differently by different devices. To do things the right way, to learn how to format your books so they look perfect on *every* device, or to get some recommendations on paid formatting services, [check out my formatting page](#).

## Uploading

Since December, self-publishers have a big decision to make when they upload: should they go exclusive with Amazon? The community is divided on this topic, and I tried to present both sides on my blog. Here is my initial post outlining [the pros and cons of KDP Select](#), and explaining why I wasn't participating. Here's [one author's guest post on their success with the program](#), and [here's another](#). Finally, here's one from [an author who has seen sales increase by staying out](#). You really have to make your own mind up (and this is where keeping in touch with the latest developments on the above blogs and the Kindle Boards forum comes in handy).

If you don't decide to go exclusive, the main sites you need to upload to are Amazon (details below), and [Smashwords](#) (who will distribute your work to [Barnes & Noble](#), [Sony](#), [Diesel](#), iTunes and all the global Apple sites, as well as Kobo and all their partners, such as FNAC and WHSmith). Additional sites such as [DriveThruFiction](#), [AllRomance/OmniLit](#), and [Xinxii](#) (who will also distribute to Casa del Libro in Spain) are worth considering, but please note the first two require ISBNs (Smashwords provide free ISBNs and Amazon and Xinxii don't require them). I've detailed the steps below for Amazon, but all the sites are quite similar.

If you have decided to go exclusive with Amazon, then you only have [one site to upload to](#). All you need is your cover and your formatted e-book file. Setting up an account is simple, and only takes a minute or two. You will need to fill out your name and address and your payment information for royalties (if you are in the UK, you will be paid by bank transfer for UK sales, but by check for everything else).

When you click “Upload New Title” you will be taken to a new page, where you will fill out all the information about your book: the title, the author’s name, the description/blurb ([nifty advice here](#)), and the publisher’s name - you can leave that blank, enter your own name or that of your publishing company. Whether you set up your own publishing company or not is something you must decide for yourself, and there is some advice on that, and other practicalities such as [tax, copyright, and ISBNs here](#).

Next you must enter the book’s categories. You only get two, so choose them wisely. Try and drill down as much as possible. For example, under Fiction, you will find a sub-section for Romance, and further sub-sections for Regency, Historical, Time-Travel etc. Picking Regency will automatically include you in the general Romance and Fiction categories. You also get to pick seven keywords. Try not to make these too generic, as these decide whether your book shows up on searches on Amazon. As such “fiction” won’t be much use to you. “Paranormal romance” or “cozy mystery” will be much better. There is more detailed advice on [the importance of choosing the right categories here](#).

The last item on the page is the box to upload your book. I strongly urge you *not* to enable DRM. It does nothing to prevent piracy and only antagonizes readers (some boycott books with DRM).

On the second and final page, you must select which territories you wish to sell your book in (which is usually all, but some self-publishers may have sold UK or US rights to a publisher and will then have to exclude that territory). Next you set your price. Amazon pay 70% royalties on books priced between \$2.99 and \$9.99 (and £1.49 and £6.49 in the UK) and 35% outside that. Note that the 70% royalty rate only applies to sales in the US, Canada, the UK, and the countries served by the German, French, Italian, and Spanish Kindle Stores. Sales in all other countries, like Australia, Ireland, or South Africa, will only pay 35% royalties, no matter what price you set. For detailed advice on pricing, [please read this extensive post](#).

The final box refers to e-book lending (Kindle owners can lend books to each other for two week periods, but can't read the book themselves while it is lent out). I recommend enabling this feature. And then you are done. The book will take anything between a few hours and three days to go live on Amazon, but lately it takes less than 24 hours. When it does appear, congratulate yourself: you are now a published author.

## **Mailing List**

One of the most crucial (and under-used) tools is the mailing list. I have a clickable link at the back of all my books which takes readers to a newsletter sign-up. I only mail this list when I have a new release, and now it's responsible for significant sales every time I

launch a book. Get it going from the start. I use [MailChimp](#) - it produces [very pretty emails](#), you can track who opens your email or clicks on your links, and it's free. It's also a great way to announce your newly published book to all your friends, family, and colleagues. Don't forget to include links to the free Amazon apps, as many people don't know they can enjoy e-books on their smartphones and laptops.

## **Marketing and Promotion**

This is the stage which has most writers throwing their hands in the air. All those hours whittling prose can render one somewhat anti-social and technophobic. Some writers won't even contemplate self-publishing because they want to avoid this stuff, and shoot for a traditional publishing deal which they think will allow them to just write. That, I'm afraid, is a myth. Publishers these days expect writers to be active on social media. Writers are expected to shoulder the burden of connecting with readers, whether they self-publish or not.

For those averse to this side of things, I have some good news. The most important marketing you can do is to ensure you have a professional product on the market: a great story, an arresting cover, a professionally edited book, and proper formatting. On top of that, many successful self-publishers such as Bob Mayer advise that promotion is more-or-less pointless until you have a few titles out, as you are unlikely to get the return on your efforts to justify the time spent. This makes sense. If readers enjoy your work, they tend to purchase everything you have published. If you only have one book out, they can't buy anything else.

I don't think this means you should do nothing. I believe in giving each book a little push, and then getting back to writing. After all, the best promotional tool *any* writer has is a new release. Nothing has boosted my sales (on all titles) like a new book, and I've tried a little of everything at this point. But I also think you need to make it easy for readers to connect with you.

## Social Media

There are plenty of people out there who will tell you that blogging is essential, or you'll never make it without a huge number of Twitter followers, or without a slick website, or an active Facebook Page, or by being active on Tumblr or Pinterest, or whatever the latest fad is. Frankly, there are too many counter-examples to agree with sweeping statements like that. There are plenty of bestselling self-publishers who built themselves up from nothing by doing very little of all that stuff.

I have a simple rule, which I suggest you employ: only do the stuff you enjoy. I focus mostly on blogging, so I spend a bit of time on that. I have a big readership now, which is its own reward. My blog readers are my sounding board for any ideas I come up with. I debate the issues of the day with them, talk about new projects I'm working on, and exchange information. I have some [tips on blogging here](#).

Blogging, like Twitter and all social media, shouldn't be viewed as a venue to directly market to people. Social media is about building connections. Those connections may lead to book sales, but you can't approach it with that goal in mind, or it won't work.

However, as I said above, it's important to make it easy for readers to find you so I recommend a basic social media set-up of a Twitter page, a Facebook Fan page, a blog or website, and to create your [Amazon Author Central](#) page. You will have to do the latter for both the UK and the US (and the other Amazon sites), and you can link it all up to your blog and Twitter account. I go into a lot of detail in my book [Let's Get Digital: How To Self-Publish, And Why You Should](#) on additional marketing and promotional strategies such as competitions, giveaways, Goodreads, book blog reviews, getting Amazon reviews, guest posting, blog tours, and I also give detailed advice on blogging, websites, Twitter, and so on. If you just want to read those sections, [you can download the PDF for free on my blog](#) and just read Steps 6 to 10.

## Free as a Sales Tool

Why do I make my book free on my blog? Surely that harms my sales, right? Wrong. I get emails about that book nearly every day (tip: put your email address in the back of your books). Over half of those readers tried the free PDF first, and then purchased the book for their Kindle. In the last six, I've had more than 10,000 downloads of the free version, and almost 2,000 sales of the paid version. I have no doubt that those sales would be *significantly* lower, but for the availability (and widespread dissemination) of the free version. It has also driven sales of my other books, brought in a few hundred dollars in donations, and boosted things like blog readership and Twitter followers (connections which can turn into sales over time).

I'm not recommending that you do the same with your book. I think this was a special case, given that it was a how-to, and the subject of my blog, and I haven't used the same

tactic for my other releases. I merely mention it so that you won't be afraid of "free", and to show that clever use of a free book can drive paid sales. Here are some more examples. You can write a novella set in the same world as your series, and make it free. You can set the first book in a series free for a time to hook readers, who will then go on and pay for the rest. Or you can make a short story free to get your name out there. In all cases (and you should be doing this anyway), you should have *clickable* links to all your other books in the backmatter (and to your blog, Twitter etc.).

## Print Versions

Many self-publishers don't bother with print versions as it's next-to-impossible to get their work into bookstores. This is a mistake. The overwhelming majority of readers still read print books. It's difficult to reach them (and to compete with publishers on price), but you will still make some print sales on Amazon, and, if you pay \$25 for expanded distribution, on sites like Barnes & Noble and The Book Depository. I hired someone to format the print book for me, and it cost me around \$50. That total cost of \$75 for my last print edition was made back in a few days. Don't forget, even those that have switched to e-reading may still like a physical keepsake of their favorites. I used [Createspace](#), and there is [excellent advice here](#) on the whole process.

## Keep Writing!

Much of the above might sound like hard work, but it really doesn't have to be. Focus on the basics: a well-written story, a smart cover, a proper edit, clean formatting, and an enticing blurb. You only have to do that stuff once, and then you can get back to working

on the next book. I would recommend holding off on most promotion until you have a few titles out, but there's no harm doing something like blogging in your spare time – if you enjoy it. While things like Facebook and Twitter can be big time-sinks, your primary focus should always be on writing. The other stuff only intrudes on your writing time *if you let it*. Be disciplined. Set yourself writing targets. Don't worry about sales; they take time, and one thing that will certainly help is getting more titles up. Make writing your number one goal every day, and the rest will fall into place.