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1. Why should I self-publish?

Self-publishing, also known as indie publishing, is an increasingly viable option for writers. However, the publishing path you choose depends greatly on your goals as a writer, so the first question to ask yourself is, "What do I want?" Do you want to make a certain amount of money each month? Win a literary prize? See your titles in bookstores across the country? Grow a rabid fan base? Once you've answered this question, you'll be in a better place to choose the publishing path that's right for you. Here are just a few reasons why you might consider self-publishing:

- **You want the satisfaction of seeing your book in print or online** (though not in physical bookstores). Some writers just want to hold a copy of their book in their hands, and to say that they've reached their goal of writing a book. This is a perfectly admirable goal, and the easiest way to reach it is to self-publish.
- **You're an entrepreneur.** If you approach your writing like a business and have a keen mind for marketing and business strategy, self-publishing is an area in which you can let those talents soar. See question #3, "What does it take to be successful at self-publishing?"
- **You want control over your work.** Traditionally-published authors often have no say over editorial changes, title, cover art, pricing, and marketing. If you self-publish, all of those decisions are yours to make. Bestselling author Barry Eisler turned down half a million dollars from St. Martin's Press in order to self-publish the rest of his John Rain series. In an [interview with the Huffington Post](#), Eisler said, "Because of my personality and business experience, I found it very frustrating to have to entrust business decisions to people whose thinking, work process and conclusions I don't necessarily agree with or respect. I've had publishers make terrible decisions for my books. I found it painful and frustrating to have to live with those decisions. I find it much more satisfying to be responsible for and in charge of those decisions." If you sense you would feel the same way as Eisler, self-publishing might be the way to go.
- **You want to skip the slush pile.** *If* you and others are very confident in your writing ability and *if* you have a great deal of marketing savvy and *if* you are willing to work extremely hard and *if* you are willing to invest your own money to hire professional help, then self-publishing *may* be a way to achieve a traditional publishing deal without going the route of query letters and rejection slips. But in order to do this you must first become an extremely successful self-published author, which is every bit as difficult as becoming a successful traditionally-published author. Most publishers and agents monitor the self-published bestseller lists, so if you can make it to the top, you may be able to translate that success into a traditional publishing deal.

Being rejected by agents and publishers is *not* a good reason to self-publish. The vast majority of the time, this means your novel is not yet ready for publication. Instead of rushing to self-publish after the first few rejections, spend some more time working on your craft. An exception to this rule would be if you are consistently getting positive feedback about the high quality of your work, but there just isn't a market for it. Then you might consider taking matters into your own hands and self-publishing your work.

2. What are the steps toward self-publishing?

- **First, write a great book.** Then re-write it. Then have some friends or trusted writers read it and give you feedback. Then re-write.
- **Hire an editor.** No matter how talented you are, *do not skip this step*. The best writers in the world still rely on their editors for advice and correction, and you should too. At the very least, hire a copy editor and proof reader, but we would strongly advise also hiring a [structural or stylistic editor](#) as well—someone who can look for plot holes, character inconsistencies, and style issues. Having a well-edited book may be the difference between having a book that languishes and one that succeeds. (Author Elizabeth S. Craig keeps an updated list of freelance editors, cover designers, and formatters [here](#), or ask author friends for recommendations.)
- **Research.** Self-publishing is a fast-changing industry, so what worked last year may not work this year. Amazon's KDP Select program used to work wonders; this year boxed sets are all the rage. Get up to speed on the industry by reading established and well-respected blogs like [The Creative Penn](#) and [JaneFriedman.com](#) by following the discussion threads on indie author sites like [KBoards.com](#). The more information you have, the better decisions you'll make.
- **Format.** Once you've had the book professionally edited (including a copy edit and proofread), you'll need to find someone who can format it for you. If you're super tech-savvy and have loads of time on your hands, you can learn how to do this step yourself ([GalleyCat has compiled all the formatting guides here](#))— or you can use a program like [Draft2Digital](#), or pay a freelancer to do it for you. You'll need a MOBI version (for Kindles), an EPUB version (for all other e-readers), and possibly a print version if you are going that route.
- **Hire a cover artist** to design the cover for your book. Unless you are a professional designer, we highly recommend *not* doing this yourself. Nothing screams "self-published" like a poorly-designed cover, and it's the first thing a potential reader will see. Whether we like it or not, people *do* judge books by their covers. [Find a pro here](#).
- **Set a price point.** Most self-published books are between \$2.99 and \$9.99. Any lower and readers might question the value of the book; any higher and you're competing with traditionally-published e-books. If you're self-publishing through Amazon, you'll receive a 70% royalty for staying within this price range; outside of that and it drops to 35%. A good rule of thumb is to look at how other self-published books in your genre are priced, or to look at similar books by Amazon Publishing, which has the data to back up their price points. A [recent Smashwords survey](#) pointed out that the bestseller sweet spot seems to be either \$2.99 or \$3.99.
- **Get an ISBN.** It's free for Canadians, and you can apply for one through [Library and Archives Canada](#).

- **Upload.** Once you've done your research and decided on your distribution path (see question #8), upload your formatted files and cover art to the distributor's website and wait with bated breath for your book to go live!

3. What does it take to be successful at self-publishing?

The simple answer is the same thing it takes to be successful at any kind of publishing: talent, hard work, and luck. However, as an indie author, you are not only the writer, you are also the publisher. Writing is an art; publishing is a business. And so successful self-publishers are usually entrepreneurs with a keen business sense, marketing know-how, and the willingness to work long and hard. Just as in traditional publishing, there is no magic formula for success. Some authors will work very hard and still fail to reach an audience; others will become overnight bestsellers for no apparent reason. But the outliers—whether you're talking about J.K. Rowling or self-publishing phenomenon Hugh Howey—are rare. Most successful self-publishers produce quality books at regular intervals (at least two books a year is recommended) and work long, hard hours to build their audiences.

4. How expensive is self-publishing?

The cost of self-publishing varies widely. You can spend a lot of money, or you can spend a little, but I would recommend spending at least some. Remember, publishing is a business. Think of it as an investment in your career. Here's a breakdown of some of the costs you can expect to incur:

Substantive/stylistic editor: \$2,000 – \$10,000

Copy editor: \$1,000 - \$5,000

Proof reader: \$500 - \$1,000

Cover designer: \$150 – \$3,500

Layout: \$100 - \$500

ISBN: free for Canadians; \$125 for Americans

Optional costs to consider:

Netgalley upload: \$399

Audiobook narrator: \$1,200 (or royalty share)

Marketing/PR: \$100 - \$5,000

Website hosting/domain: \$100

Remember, you don't HAVE to spend this much money—you're the boss, and you set your own budget. If money is limited, pay for what you absolutely cannot do yourself. Try swapping with other professionals. Maybe you have a friend who is a graphic designer and owes you a favour. But your goal isn't to put out the cheapest book possible—it's to put out a book that will be indistinguishable from traditionally published books. It's to put out a book that is free of typos or aggravating editorial errors. It's to have a cover that draws the readers' attention and makes them want to click on the book to find out what it's about. You don't have to spend a fortune, but we would also say that in order to be successful, you have to pay something. Treat it like a business, not a hobby.

5. Can I make money as a self-published author?

Yes, just as you can make money as a traditionally-published author. Many authors won't start to make money until they have published four or five books, so don't expect to get rich overnight. In fact, most self-published books sell fewer than 250 copies. The debate regarding which publishing path makes more money has been raging for some time, and probably won't be settled any time soon. But thanks to new surveys and increased transparency, we are starting to see some trends. According to Hugh Howey's [Author Earnings Report](#), which looks at the 7,000 top selling digital titles on Amazon's bestseller lists, we know that self-published books now represent 31% of e-book sales on Amazon's Kindle Store, and indie authors are earning almost 40% of the e-book dollars going to authors. According to publishing expert Dana Beth Weinberg, [Digital Book World and Writers' Digest survey](#) found that "self-publishing had enabled some authors to make it big, but they constituted only a small percentage of the vast numbers of hopefuls. Yes, traditional publishers [...] had helped some chosen few authors succeed, but many traditionally published authors weren't doing better than their self-published counterparts."

No matter which publishing path you choose, it's difficult to make a living as a writer. But the good news is that it's much, much more viable to make a living as an indie author today than it has ever been before. Just remember, it's not going to happen without a lot of hard work at both the craft of writing and the business of publishing.

6. How can I obtain funding for my project?

Traditional government and literary grants are typically not open to self-publishers, especially for a debut author. If you have an established network of enthusiastic supporters (which is hard to come by without first building your audience), crowdfunding through sites like Kickstarter or IndieGoGo is an option. But if you're just starting out, you will likely have to fund your project from your own pocket. Think of it as an investment in your new small business.

7. What is the difference between self-publishing and vanity publishing?

While vanity publishing could be considered a subset of self-publishing, it's a practise that should be avoided. A vanity publisher charges an author or aspiring author up front to publishing his or her books, often accompanied by promises of fame and riches. However, there is usually little or no editing, marketing, or distribution. Most vanity publishers are seen by the publishing industry as predators who take advantage of naïve or over-eager authors.

Self-publishing, on the other hand, is when the author remains in control, does the work of the publisher, and ensures professional editing and design standards are met.

If you're considering working with a vanity publisher and aren't sure if they're legit, check [Preditors and Editors](#) or [Writer Beware](#), two sites that keep authors up-to-date on scams and unscrupulous practices in the publishing industry.

8. How can I distribute and sell my self-published book?

The vast majority of authors self-publish digitally, although there are print-on-demand options for those who want to make a print version available to their readers (but even these are sold mostly online). Some physical bookstores will stock your self-published titles on consignment if you are a local author, but it's up to you to go store-to-store, talk with the consignment manager, and supply print copies of your books.

Amazon, Barnes & Noble (Nook), Kobo, and eBooks are the most popular retail outlets for self-published books. You can upload your files to each vendor directly through their respective self-publishing platforms, or you can use a service like Smashwords, which uploads to all vendors for you in exchange for a fee. Amazon and Barnes & Noble also have print-on-demand services (CreateSpace and Nook Press Print, respectively) that will enable you to sell print books through their websites (but will not get you on shelves at Barnes & Noble).

9. How can I get my self-published book reviewed?

Publisher's Weekly and Kirkus Reviews both offer reviews of self-published books, but at a significant cost (and in the case of PW, no guarantee of an actual review). Most self-published authors prefer to have reviews where the readers are—online, whether that is on Amazon.com, Goodreads, or on popular book blogs. The number (and quality) of customer reviews can also determine how much a book gets promoted on Amazon, so it should be an important part of your marketing plan. Here are a number of ways to get reviews for your self-published book:

- Research book blogs. Find the blogs that review self-published books in your genre and send a query email, asking if it would be okay for you to send them a copy of your book for review (many have query forms built into their websites). Some love to receive e-books, others prefer print. Most are overwhelmed with requests, so make sure you follow their query guidelines to the letter to increase your chances of receiving a positive response. [Here's a list of reviewers accepting self-published books.](#)
- Host a giveaway on Goodreads. This massive online book discussion/review/cataloguing site allows authors to offer free print copies of their books as part of the Goodreads Giveaway program. The giveaways are open to all Goodreads members, and the winners are chosen at random by Goodreads. The author is then responsible for sending out books to the winners. Most but not all of the winners of the books will leave a review on Goodreads and perhaps elsewhere.

- Give copies of your book to friends, family members, and social media contacts in exchange for an honest (and even anonymous) review on Amazon.com, Goodreads, and other retail sites. Free copies in exchange for reviews is an established practice, but be careful that you don't offer other incentives (Amazon gift card, prizes, etc.), or it may look like you are trying to buy reviews, which is a no-no.
- Upload your book to [Netgalley](#), a site where book reviewers and bloggers can download digital copies of books for review purposes. It costs between \$399 and \$599 for a self-published author to list his or her book on Netgalley, but it's a valuable place to get your book in front of active reviewers.
- Ask! At the end of your e-book, include links to review sites and a blurb asking the reader to leave a review. Most readers are happy to do so when asked, but just don't think about it. Don't be afraid to ask!

Want to learn more? Check out this list of [Top 50 Sites for Indie Authors](#) for up-to-date information, tips and encouragement on your self-publishing journey.