

## Should I Seek a Traditional Publisher or Self-Publish?

Wouldn't it be awesome if I could tell you whether you seek a traditional publisher or self-publish your book? It would be fantastic. But that's a decision that only you can make. But what I *can* do is give you a framework for thinking about the pros and cons of each path.

### Pros of Traditional Publishing

- Credibility, as a traditional publisher can lend a sense of “legitimacy”
- Working with an experienced team of editors, proofreaders, designers, marketers, etc.
- Publisher has established channels of distribution
- Writer typically receives an advance (though small advances still don't cover time “costs” of writing that book)
  - When book is published, the publisher will execute a marketing plan for your book, oftentimes including catalog placement, advertising, publicity, conference promotion, and more (marketing budgets vary depending on publisher)
  - Marketing team will advise author on what to do pre- and post-publication, since author is typically expected to actively participate in promotion



### Cons of Traditional Publishing

- Because the industry is competitive, it can be difficult to land a contract
- Typically author must bring a large or growing author platform
- Publisher has ultimate control over creative process, cover design and title/subtitle (though author typically gives input)
- The process from signing a contract to book publication is typically eighteen months or more

### Pros of Self-Publishing

- Control over entire creative process: your opinion is the one that matters
- Author maintains rights to their book
- Higher profit per book on sales
- The publishing process can move more quickly

## Cons of Self-Publishing

- Control over entire process: you are responsible for every aspect of editing, formatting, design, etc.
- Higher upfront costs, as author must pay for services like editing and design
- Potential to lose money
- Author is responsible for selling every book
- Less visibility in the marketplace
- Might need to fight self-publishing stigma, though this varies depending on project and genre (and this “stigma” is decreasing)



## TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING

If you'd like to seek a traditional publisher, they're going to want to see 3 things:

- 1. A fresh concept**
- 2. A growing platform**
- 3. Strong writing**

If any of these 3 is missing, publisher will most likely decline a book. However, when smaller publishers recognize a great concept and strong writing, they often have more flexibility to work with authors who have smaller platforms. (For those who are seeking a traditional publisher, I unpack all of these in my online course!)

## SELF-PUBLISHING

### What I Want You To Know About the Front End of Self-Publishing

When you self-publish, you are investing your own money into producing a product that you will sell.

When you self-publish you (should) pay for developmental editing, copy editing, proofreading, cover design, interior book design, and other publishing essentials. So before you decide to self-publish, count the costs.

## 1. Editing Process

Whether or not they realize it—and whether or not you realize it!—readers expect excellence in publishing. Even one or two errors, in an otherwise brilliant manuscript, quickly erode reader confidence.

When a contracted manuscript is submitted to a traditional publisher, the process will typically involve:

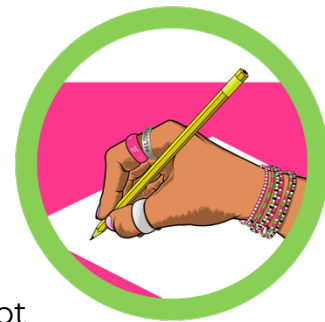
- One or two rounds of developmental editing
- A round of copy editing
- Several meticulous rounds of proofreading, looking for the tiniest errors: an extra space after a period, a “zero” that’s really a capital “O,” or a “there” instead of a “their.”

While this rigorous level of precision requires time, money, and energy, your readers will be best served if you put this important work into your book up front.

Anyone planning to self-publish should understand the process of producing a traditionally published book. When traditional publishers contract with an author to publish a book, they invest money into the process.

### **A fairly typical process for a traditionally published book—and ideally your self-published book!—goes something like this:**

- Author writes first draft of book
- Author combs through first draft, once or twice or sixteen times, to make it excellent
- Author submits first draft to editor
- Editor offers an edit that might be called a “developmental,” “macro,” or “content” edit
- Author reworks manuscript based on editor’s comments
- Author resubmits manuscript
- Editor offers a second round of feedback
- Author reworks the second draft of the manuscript
- (There may be additional rounds of editing)
- Manuscript is line-edited, to hone the way you use language
- Manuscript is copyedited, offering a more technical edit of spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.
- Manuscript is typeset in book layout form (At this point, only the smallest changes are possible.)
- Typeset manuscript is scoured by a proofreader



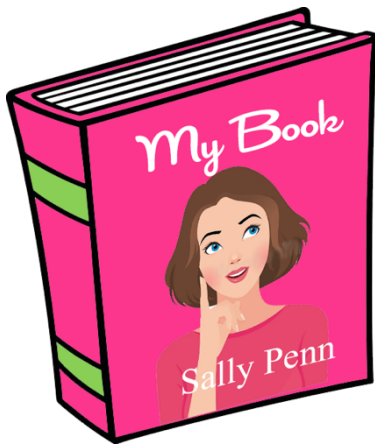
- Typeset manuscript is scoured by second proofreader, and possibly more
- Manuscript goes to printer!

And as any reader knows, even *with* this thorough process, books still end up with typos and other errors!

Because it's clearly an extensive process, the financial reality for most writers is that those who self-publish must pick and choose where they invest their resources.

Les Bridgeman, author of *Seeing the Invisible God: 52 Reflections on Divine Anatomy*, encourages writers who are self-publishing, "Make sure to get your book edited by a professional with experience. There are so many grammar and punctuation rules and you need someone with expertise in those areas to look at your work." He adds, "I also learned that one editor is not enough. Most professionally published books have gone through a team of editors. If you self publish, who will be your team of editors?"

## 2. Book Cover



Whether readers will be browsing through a bookstore, scrolling through thumbnail images on Amazon, or buying from a merch table, *the cover matters*. It both signals what's inside and whether what's inside has value for the reader. Even if you have the technical skills to create a cover using your photo editing software, don't do it! Resist the urge. There are tried and true principles of effective book design relating to images, colors, font styles, and font sizes that make for great covers. Let a professional design the cover of your book.

## 3. Book Design

Have you ever noticed that the inside of a traditionally published book, all the pages of content, have been *designed*? Care and attention have been given to the precise measurements of margins, as well as the size and shape of fonts in the text, chapter titles, headers and subheads. None of this is accidental. Each choice was made to serve the book and serve the reader. Although certain independent publishing options might *aid* you with book design, it's up to you to ensure that nothing about the design of your book creates a barrier to a reader reading your book.

The purpose of your book is to serve the reader, and a well-written book with a sharp design does that. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

#### 4. Printing Cost

Printers usually give discounts when you order books in bulk. But too many authors end up with countless boxes of extra books in attics and basements. Purchase wisely.

### What I Want You To Know About the Back End of Self-Publishing

*It's hard to sell books.* When you publish with a traditional publisher, sales and marketing teams partner with authors to sell books. When you choose to self-publish, you become responsible for selling *every single book*.

Before you sink your own dollars into publishing a book, you must have a plan for how you will market and distribute the book to your target audience. Don't just throw it up at Amazon with millions of other books and hope for the best. You've been warned.

*Here are some marks of those who have been successful:*

#### 1. Authors Who Succeed at Selling Books Have Access to Audiences



Folks who do well selling their self-published books are folks who have access to audiences. Maybe they have a large social media following or a popular podcast. Other others, with lots of speaking gigs, have opportunities to sell in-person to audiences.

#### 2. Authors Who Succeed at Selling Books Utilize Strategy

Other folks who do well selling self-published books are those who have a smart clear calculated strategy. This may include speaking gigs, facebook advertising, print advertising, publicity, inviting Amazon reviews, etc. Publishing a book and hoping it will sell, or believing it is so great that it will catch on like wildfire, is naive.

#### 3. Authors Who Succeed at Selling Books Invest in Advertising

People need to learn about your book. One of the ways that happens is through advertising. I know that there are smartie geniuses out there who have mastered effective advertising--let's say...advertising on social media. They understand how to implement advertising that *produces* sales. If you plan to invest in advertising, don't drop the cash and hope for the best. Use your advertising dollars well.

## Talk to Those Who Have Self-Published

One of the most useful things you can do is to talk to authors who have self-published. Here are a few questions to ask them:

- What was the best part of the experience for you?
- What was the greatest challenge?
- Was the cost of self-publishing what you expected? How much?
- Do you have any regrets?
- What would you do differently next time?



Some writers who self-publish do have regrets

- An author may have regrets because he printed 5000 books and 4942 of them are now mildewing in the garage/attic.
- An author may have regrets because there were three small errors in the first chapter that caused readers to lose confidence in the book.
- An author may have regrets because the clever title she adored is really so random that book browsers don't know what the book's about.
- An author may have regrets because he let the teenager next-door design his book cover—a critical part of attracting readers online and in physical bookstores. What seemed at first like a great cover really looks less-than-professional beside other book covers.

Talk to others who have self-published to learn more about their experiences.

## If You Intend to Self-Publish, Ask These Three Questions

Because the financial risk of self-publishing for the writer is greater than that of seeking a traditional publisher, I am typically cautious to recommend it. These are the questions I encourage writers to ask:

1. Am I committed to producing an excellent product?
2. Do I have the money to invest in producing an excellent product? (And am I prepared for the possibility that I will not see a return on my investment?)
3. Do I have a strategy for marketing and selling my excellent product?

## Self-Publishing Might be Right For You!

Self-publishing may be right for you.

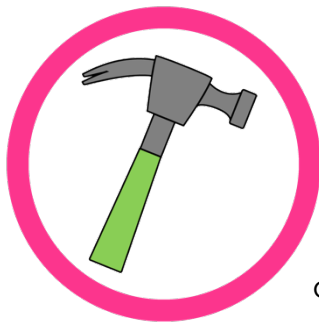
A friend for whom self-publishing has been a success is an author named Barb Raveling. Barb has built a platform, including a popular podcast, on achieving healthy weight-loss from a Christian perspective. Because readers are finding Barb through her podcast, and because she's meeting readers' needs, she's been effective at selling her self-published books.

Sharon Garlough Brown published her novel with Westbow Press, sold several thousand books, and was then noticed and picked up by InterVarsity Press. Her brilliant book, *Sensible Shoes: A Story About the Spiritual Journey*, ended up on The Today Show because Cathy Lee Gifford loved it so much!

Self-publishing was the right choice for Sharon and for Barb. It may be right for you.

## Your Self-Published Book Can Be a Tool for What You Do

For years I was very hesitant about self-publishing. And that's because I didn't want for writers to invest lots of dollars into the process—which is what it takes!—and then not see those dollars again in book sales.



Recently, I've changed my tune.

I've become convinced that a self-published book can have value to an author that can't be calculated in book sales. It can be a tool that the writer uses that can often open doors and provide opportunities the writer wouldn't otherwise have.

In 2023, Helen Johnson published her first book, *Divine Interruptions*, at the age of eighty-three! (Get it, Helen.) And in the first year that Helen's book was available, she secured more than twenty speaking opportunities! She spoke in homes, in libraries, in churches, and to other organizations. Helen had always had something important to say, but the fact that she finally had "a book" opened all those doors of opportunity.

If you have a strategy to use your self-published book as a *tool*, to do that thing you were made to do, then its value will exceed the number of copies you sell.

## Can I Self-Publish First and Then Seek a Traditional Publisher?

If your self-published book doesn't sell well, a publisher won't be interested.

**Q:** How many self-published books do you need to sell in order for a traditional publisher to take an interest in publishing your book?

**A:** While there are no hard and fast numbers, one savvy agent I know says you need to sell 2k-3k books with a year, or 5k books within two years in order to garner a publisher's attention.

### Summary

There are risks and benefits to both traditional publishing and self-publishing. Choose the path that is right for you!

You can do this,  
Margot

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