

A Self-Publishing Primer

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Writing Is the Easy Part



So you've written a book. Yay! Have a glass of wine to celebrate and then another to prepare you for what comes next. As a self-publisher, you'll wear many hats and they won't always fit perfectly.

Creativity vs. Commerce

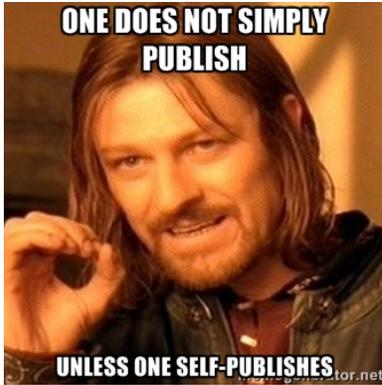
To keep this from being a full-scale, internal civil war, decide what you want out of your book.

- ! Do you want simply to share it with the world?
- ! Do you want to make money?
- ! Do you want both?

Answering those questions before you start will help you balance the difficult task of being your own publisher/agent/publicist.

For the sake of this session, I'm going to assume you're going for a balanced approach.

Before You Publish



It's easy to publish. Too easy. Take pride in your work, respect your readers and have your book edited. It doesn't have to cost a mint. Whether you know an editor or hire one, be sure to have eyes on your manuscript. We're too close to see most problems. Some people can self-edit, but they're the exception and not the rule. I know I can't. I'm mildly dyslexic and a horrible proofer.

Editing

Don't think it's important? Consider this:



Types of editing:

- ! Developmental/Content - Big picture, plot holes, flat characters, etc.
- ! Line - Paragraph/sentence level, how you use words, sentence style, language flow, awkward/unclear phrasing, etc.
- ! Copy - Technical side of the line editor, they deal with grammar, punctuation, syntax, and consistency in usage
- ! Proofreading - Looking for the typos, extra spaces, and other boo-boos

\$ Cost: A few hundred to a few thousand depending on the type and experience of the editor.

✓ **Pro Tip:** Make sure you ask for a sample of their work. Most will do a sample edit of a few pages to a chapter. Always ask for this. Just because someone has a shingle out doesn't mean they're qualified.

You may, at some point in this process, have to kill your darlings. Be ruthless. And when your editor sends you back a page soaked in red ink that looks and feels like your blood, know you are in good company. The pain you suffer is universal for writers and rite of passage.

Once your book is the best it can be--perfectionists, you have to let go sometime--it's on to formatting.

Formatting

Lucky for you, this is easy. You can use programs to write in like [Scivener](#) (Mac or PC) or [Vellum](#) (Mac only). After making a few setting adjustments you can create beautifully formatted files for uploading to the retail sites.

CHAPTER 1



The nightmares had come again.
With a surge of panic, Simon Cross pushed himself off the bed and away from the cold, sweat-soaked sheets. His heart racing, his breath quick and rough, he forced his eyes to adjust to the dark room as the last vestiges of sleep faded.
He glared down at his bed, as if it were to blame, as if the sheets and pillows had knowingly harbored the nightmare. Swearing, Simon escaped the darkened bedroom wanting to get as far away from the nightmares as he could, but they trailed along with him. They followed him down the hall and down the stairs.

You can also hire people to format for you. This is helpful if you have any complex formatting issues. Before I started doing it myself, I used [Polgarus Studios](#). There are oodles of formatters who can do the job for very little. For the true technophobe, on Amazon, you can even upload a Word doc.

\$ Cost: Variable, \$25-100 for a 60k manuscript

Blurb

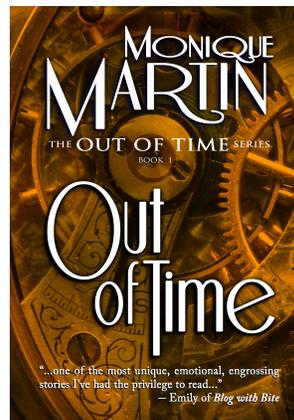
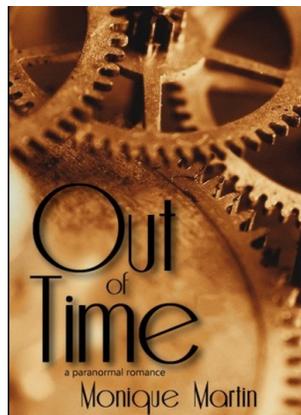
Writing a good book description (blurb) is critical to your book's success. You want to entice the reader without giving too much away, and you want to do it in about 200 words or less. No pressure!

- ! Don't summarize. This isn't a synopsis but a hook.
- ! Keep it brief. Think 3 short paragraphs, tops.
- ! The blurb "lives" around the end of act one. That's usually where your big hook is, where your MC has crossed from the known into the unknown (Hero's Journey shout out!) and accepted their "quest".

✓ Pro Tip: Focus on character. People connect with people, don't get too caught up in your setting or backstory. KISS. Introduce your MC (who). What do they want (goal)? What gets in their way (obstacle)? What do they try to do (plan)? What happens if they fail (stakes)?

Cover

Presentation matters. You want a professional face on your book. It's worth the investment to do this right. Which one did I do by myself and which was done by a professional? Which one do you think sells more books?



Check out the covers of the books in your genre. Are there any commonalities? Tropes? Make sure your book cover signals the correct genre. Consider the cute cartoony covers for cozies (alliteration ftw!) or the bold sans serif cityscapes of many thrillers.

You will probably say to yourself, "There's this awesome scene with an alligator and a blow dryer. I want that on my cover." Unless an alligator and a blow dryer signals genre/tone, don't do it and if they do, send me a copy, today!

A book cover isn't for you. It also isn't for the readers who loved the alligator and the blow dryer scene. It's for *potential* readers. These people have no idea why that scene is ten kinds of awesome. This is packaging. This is the sizzle, not the steak. Your cover should do three things:

1. Entice the reader to click on it to learn more.
2. Signal the genre (An alligator might get me to click, but it doesn't say romance, unless you write alligator shifter romance, then have at it.)
3. Capture the tone of your book. Is it sexy? Is it funny? Is it sweet? You don't want a half-naked, muscle-bound dude looking phrowr and take-me-now on the cover if it's a sweet romance. Make sure the imagery captures the tone of the book.

\$ Cost: You can find some [great pre-mades](#) for \$50 or so. Custom covers will cost anywhere from \$50 to \$800.

✓ Pro Tip: If you're writing a series (and that's a good idea) make sure your first book is visually brandable. Is that a word? Your covers will not only brand your series, but your author brand as well. Think [Courtney Milan's covers](#) but with your own style.

✓✓ Pro Tip 2: Electric Boogaloo: Typography is important. You can have a great image, but if the typography stinks on ice so will the cover.

Resource for lots of cover artists: [KBoards Yellow Pages](#)

Creating a Platform



This is where the introverts start to feel that bubbling panic. I feel your pain, but you can do this. You don't have to spend every waking minute hawking your book, but you do have to lay a little groundwork here to help your career. You can do eet!

- ! Twitter - This is for the very social. I'm not a Tweeter. But you should create an account anyway. The more ways your readers can find you, the better.
- ! Facebook - Pretty important. I use it regularly to interact with readers. Get a page not a profile. I have both and use the profile for my personal stuff and the page for anything writing related. On your page you can run contests, give sneak peeks/teasers, offer special sales, etc. It's also a place you can use to advertise (see the marketing section below). Pro Tip: Posts with images increase engagement.
- ! Website: You have to have a website. You can get a simple, free one using sites like [WordPress](#) or [Weebly](#), or you can get as fancy as you want. But you must have at least a basic one with a way to contact you and info about your books including where to buy them.
- ! Blog: This can be a time suck, but if you feel you can regularly create content, these are a terrific way to stay in touch with readers. Pro Tip: Have your blog on your website; don't have it as a separate site/url.

Email Lists



This is perhaps the most important thing you'll do other than write a fabulous book. Create a mailing list. You can use services like [MailChimp](#) or [Aweber](#). Some will let you use the service for free until you reach a certain number of subscribers.

You will create a sign-up form for your mailing list. Put this sucker everywhere. The more people you have on your list, the better each book launch will be. Don't put this off. Have your mailing list sign-up form on your website, in your email signature, get a tattoo of it, but have it before you publish.

ARCs (Advance Reader Copies)

This is a little more advanced for people with their first book, but if you've started building your platform before you publish you can also start to create a list of ARC readers so that when you do launch, you can get some reviews up on your product pages.

✓ Pro Tip: Make sure the readers know you want honest reviews (no 5 star gimmes) and that they must disclose that they got a copy of the book in exchange for their honest review.

Getting reviews can be difficult. Don't give in to the temptation to buy them or get friends and family to write them. It's against TOS (Terms of Service), not to mention naughty. Free books will earn more reviews than paid books. My first book has over 900 reviews. They will also earn you a few harsher reviews as a few people who aren't your target audience will give you a shot simply because you're free.

Publishing the Book



So, you have your book ready to go. Your platform is ready and waiting for your readers to connect with you. Now, it's time to actually publish. Hold me.

Publishing

Going wide or exclusive for distribution, that is the question.

It's a difficult one. Amazon has a program called KDP Select. It offers perks such as 5 free days and countdown deals. You'll also be enrolled in their KU (Kindle Unlimited) Program that allows subscribed readers to borrow your book. You are paid a percentage of the overall pool. This program has changed several times since it was rolled out. Currently, you are paid by the pages read. The downside to this program is that you must be exclusive to Amazon. Whatever book you enroll in Select cannot be offered elsewhere for the 3-month term of enrollment.

To go wide or not is a complex question and one that can't be covered in a session like this. You can read more about it and discuss what's right for you on discussions boards like [KBoards](#).

There are no upfront fees to publish on any of these platforms. They take a percentage of whatever your book earns.

Amazon - The 800-pound gorilla of the self-publishing world. They haven't cornered the market, but they have the lion's share. I'm mixing my animal metaphors.

Kindle Direct Publishing: <https://kdp.amazon.com/>

Barnes & Noble - Reports of their death have been exaggerated. Mostly. While they're not the big player they used to be in print, they're still important in the ebook landscape.

Nook Press: <https://www.nookpress.com/>

Google Play - As of this session, they are still closed to new authors, but don't forget about them. Google has the resources to be a major player in the ebook world.

Books Partner Center: <https://play.google.com/books/publish/u/0/>

iBooks - Apple has been somewhat ambivalent about ebooks, but it's still important to put your books there if you go with wide distribution. They're full

of potential. (Note: You will need a Mac or access to Mac via virtual Mac services like [MacInCloud](#) to upload your book to iBooks)

iTunes Connect: <https://itunesconnect.apple.com/>

Kobo - The last of the "other" sites, Kobo excels in selling books in foreign markets. They're a Canadian company that can help you reach into places the others can't.

Kobo Writing Life: <https://www.kobo.com/writinglife>

Direct vs Aggregator

If you decide to "go wide" with your distribution, you might feel overwhelmed at the idea of handling so many venues. While I think it's best to go direct whenever possible, you might want to use an aggregator. These sites will submit for you for a small percentage.

Two of the most popular are [Smashwords](#) and [D2D](#) (Direct2Digital). While the two are comparable, I, personally, think D2D offers a better service.

Paperbacks & Audio

I won't go into great detail on publishing your book in paper or audio, but it isn't hard to do with today's POD (Print On Demand) publishers.

The two main sites people use to create inexpensive but attractive paperbacks are [CreateSpace](#) (an Amazon company) and [IngramSpark](#). This won't get your paperback books into physical bookstores, but it will make them available for purchase on the major retailers. You can also order some at a discounted price and hand-sell them or bring them to conventions like this one.

The most popular service for creating audiobooks is the Amazon owned (do you see a theme here?) [ACX](#).

Pricing



One of the advantages of being a self-publisher is pricing. Not only do you have control over your price, but, because of your lower overhead, you can typically beat the trades on price.

You can set it as you see fit and adjust on the fly. Study your genre and see what the norms are. Don't be afraid to experiment. First free in series can be a powerful tool, but can only be done if you go wide in distribution.

Amazon only allows books to be free under two circumstances: your book is enrolled in Select and you use your five free days as a promotion or your book is wide and priced free on non-Amazon sites which Amazon will pricematch, i.e., permafrees.

After You've Published



Now, you can sit back and let the ducats roll in, right? Sorry, Charlie. Now, you have to market. Well, you don't *have* to, but if you want to give your book its best chance at success, you'll need to give it a little love.

Marketing & Advertising

I feel another cringe coming on. I know, I know. You feel like a used car salesman out there hawking your book. It's not that bad. Honestly.

This is another huge topic, so I'm just going to touch on a few highlights.

Facebook: You already have your Facebook Page up and running so now all you have to do is ... wait for it ... be yourself. You are your brand. Just post things that interest you or relate to your book(s). Share stories, ask them about what they're reading. Have contests. Remember this is a marathon and not a sprint. You don't have to post daily. Test it out and find what works for you.

Facebook Advertising: You can buy ads or promote posts on Facebook. It's complicated and takes a lot of trial and error. Check out things like Mark Dawson's [Self Publishing Formula](#). In addition to his paid courses (which I have not taken) there are free videos and a Facebook group with lots of helpful hints.

Amazon's Author Central: This is often overlooked by new authors, but be sure to create an [Author Central](#) account and write a snazzy author bio. You can upload a headshot here and claim your books so you get that nice author page on Amazon.

BookBub: [Bookbub](#) is the most powerful paid advertising available to self-publishers. It's a curated ebook newsletter with an extremely large subscriber base. It's hard to get into and expensive, but can be a very effective marketing tool.

Other sites: There are oodles of ad sites that will happily take your ad dollars. Not all will provide a good bang for your buck though. Do your homework before you fork over the cash. You can learn more about sites included on [ReadersInTheKnow](#) on discussion boards like [KBoards.com](#).

Community

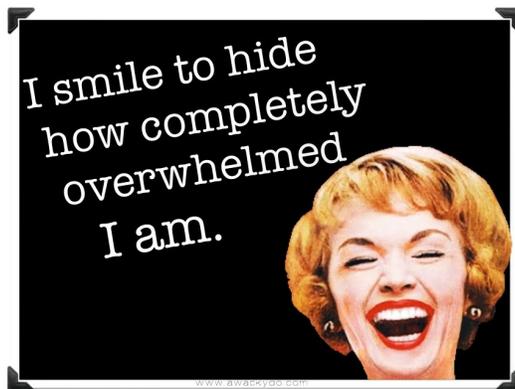
You're not in this alone. Writing (and self-publishing) is a lonely business, but you're not in it alone. The self-publishing community is amazingly helpful and supportive. Get involved and stay informed.

Here are just a few blogs and boards you should check out.

<http://www.kboards.com/> - 'The Writers' Café is the best discussion board around for self-published authors

<http://www.thepassivevoice.com/> - News aggregator to help you stay up to date with what's going on in the industry

<https://davidgaughran.wordpress.com> - Let's Get Digital is David Gaughran's blog that discusses the big issues in publishing and offers great interviews and information. He also has a [very helpful ebook](#) of the same name available.



Don't give up and most importantly ...

Keep Writing

The most important thing you can do for your books and your career is to keep writing. Nothing sells books like another book. And another. And another ...