

FAQs About Self-Publishing

By Holly Lisle

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On your commercial publishing pages, you come down hard on self-publishing. What's up with that?

Some of the articles on this site I wrote in the late 1980s, as part of a print newsletter I did for my writer's group.

Some of the articles on this site I wrote in the 1990s, when Commercial Publishing was the only respectable game in town, and its Evil Alternative was Vanity Publishing (also know as "The Writer Gets Screwed" publishing). Both commercial publishing and vanity publishing are still around.

The new kid in town, however—**Self-Publishing With Really Cool Sharp Pointy Teeth**—did not yet exist, and agents, editors, and publishers of both the Commercial and Vanity varieties had no clue it was coming.

I offered the best information available at the time, which was Go With Commercial Publishing because you don't want to get screwed by Evil Vanity Publishing. Which, on the Commercial FAQs, I call "self-publishing" because at the time, that WAS almost all self-publishing.

If you still want to publish your work The Way Our Forefathers Did (in the 1900s—prior to that, almost everyone, including my favorite writer, Mark Twain, self-published), then my information on Commercial Publishing stands as written. It's good info, it's true, and it will save you from getting screwed. All good things.

Just understand that **REAL Self-Publishing has now arrived**, and for writers who want to make a living at this, it is the Holy Grail within your reach, you can afford to do it right even if you're damn near penniless, and **if you want to make your living as a full-time writer, you're nuts not to.**

What is Commercial Publishing vs. Self-Publishing?

In Commercial Publishing, you go through the *Ritual of Self-Abasement and Desperation* until you are Anointed, you follow the *Path of Editor Supplication* until your book is properly sliced upon the *Procrustean Bed of the Least Common Denominator*, you write novels that rarely get great publisher support and that almost always get killed rapidly and brutally by chain bookstores and their retarded computerized ordering systems, and you grovel and weep when your publisher sings *The Ballad Of The Accountants of Mayhem Who Tell Us Your Books Did*

Not Do As Well As We Had Hoped and tosses you out the door to find another publisher and start over.

Okay, that was unnecessarily smart-ass—but **like many writers who've sold more than thirty novels*** via the commercial (mainstream, professional) publishing system, I have some deep and ugly scars to show for it, and I tend to get a little edgy. So let me try again.

Commercial (Mainstream, Professional) Publishing is the following process:

- Write a novel.
- Revise it to make it your best possible work.
- Send it to agents and editors until someone says “Yes, we want that,”... or until you grow old and die. (Dammit—drifted into smart-ass again there. Doesn't mean it's not true, but it ain't nice.)
- Sign a contract that allows the publishing house to keep almost all of the money the book will ever make in exchange for an advance and (usually mythical) twice-yearly royalties.
- Get an agent to make sure that this contract is as favorable to you as is humanly possible.
- Sign additional contracts for each subsequent book or series of books.
- Promote the hell out of your work, because unless you're a superstar, your publisher won't—even though your promotion will not add much (or anything) to your income.
- Get paid rarely, late, or not at all unless you hit the magic trifecta of a first-novel best-seller, increasing sales for each subsequent book, and every book enough like the others to keep your complete readership in one place without losing them to boredom (yours or theirs) or quality die-off of your novels.
- Watch your backlist go out of print so you will never

have the chance of seeing royalties on older titles, or of building a readership based on your deep list of in-print books.

- Turn into a grumpy curmudgeon who tells new writers they'd be better off digging ditches for a living.

Okay. Clearly I've buried the needle on my Smart-Ass-0'-Meter for this particular topic, but I have done the Dance Of Publishing Pain, Numfar**—and I'm NOT going to tell you you'd be better off digging ditches for a living.

I'm going to tell you writing fiction is the best damn job on the planet.

But not if you're doing it the old-fashioned way. Not anymore.

This is the better way.

High-Quality Self-Publishing is the following process:

- Write a novel.
- Revise it to make it your best possible work.
- Hire a copy-editor to make sure the book is as error-free as humanly possible.
- Buy your ISBNs.
- Either package the book yourself for Kindle, Nook, iBooks, and other e-book sellers you may decide to use, or hire a packager to do this for you (some packagers provide cover art, copy-editing, and other goodies for reasonable additional fees). LEGITIMATE book packagers will NOT claim any rights to your work, will NOT include **their** ISBNs on your work, and will not receive any compensation from your work—you will pay them to set up your book, and that's the only money they will ever see for each title they produce for you.
- Publish the book you wanted to write, not the book an

editor looking at accounting numbers and spreadsheets thought you'd be better off writing.

- Promote your work, because it's your work, and you're the one who gets paid when you sell it.
- Get paid monthly, and as you add more books to your list, get paid monthly for them, too.
- Own a growing backlist of books that will never go out of print unless YOU choose to take them out of print.

Self-publishing well is a bit more work than commercial publishing. And you have to know more things. You have to understand your rights. You have to get to know your readers. Personally—online is fine, though—you don't have to invite them to your house. You're sort of hoping once you get going on this, they wouldn't all fit.

You have to take initiative to get every part of the process done—and that can be hard, and you have to spend real money on your books to buy your ISBNs, and if you choose to hire someone to format your books or design your covers, you have to pay for that, too. You control these costs, though, and can do this on an incredibly thin shoestring if you need to.

And you'll never have an editor tell you, as one of mine told me, that writers should all have real jobs so they don't lose touch with the real world—and that she hoped I hadn't quit mine. (I'd been writing full-time for about seven years at that point.)

...

** You say there aren't actually all that many writers who've sold more than thirty novels via the commercial publishing system?*

You're right. Most writers have their pro careers wiped out by the system itself by the time they finish their third book.

I've survived in the system because I have a streak of

persistence that borders on lunatic masochism—but at this point, even I have had enough.

*** “Do the Dance of Shame, Numfar,” was the original line, which I’ve parodied. This is a Joss Whedon/ **Angel** reference. I’m a committed Joss Whedon fan, and I deeply wish TV guys had a way to self-publish, because I want to see the rest of **Firefly**, and I would pay joyfully and without hesitation for every episode he offered.*

What is Vanity Publishing vs. Self-Publishing?

Vanity Publishing still exists, and you have to be very careful to stay far, far away from it.

- If you have to **sign a contract that will give the publisher the right to sell your books** and profit from them—but you are **paying the publisher to create your books**—you’re vanity publishing.
- If **your publisher owns the ISBN that goes on this book**—and if you don’t know who owns the ISBN for your book, your publisher does, because if you didn’t buy it yourself and if you don’t have the receipt in hand to prove it, someone else bought it and it belongs to them—you’re vanity publishing.
- If you **MUST publish your book on the site that formatted the book for you**, or you are **prohibited from publishing it to any other site you like** (Kindle, iBooks, Nook, Smashwords, etc.) you are vanity publishing.

If you are truly self-publishing, you will own ALL your rights, you will own your ISBN, and you can publish the book

anywhere and everywhere you want.

When would you recommend a writer self-publish?

There are two ways to take this question, and I'll answer both here.

The first version of this question is “When would you suggest the writer abandon the pursuit of Commercial Publishing to begin Self-Publishing?”

Well...

My inner smart-ass says: Yesterday?

My more professional other self notes that there are a few reasons to pursue Commercial Publishing.

- You want to see your books on bookshelves in Big Chain Bookstores (the ones that haven't yet gone under).
- You don't want to have to carry the full responsibility for the quality of your books and the promotion of your work. (Though publisher promotion is a myth for most books that get published, so don't get comfortable.)
- You want the very real legitimizing effect you'll get from having sold your work to Penguin Putnam, Tor, Baen,

Scholastic, HarperCollins, Time-Warner, etc. (to name some of the publishers of my work). If you've published with the big boys, no one can ever say you're not a "real writer." And if you care what people think (family, friends, strangers, whatever...), you're going to have to do the Dance.

But if you want to:

- Build up a career that will let you live on your writing income;
- Keep your backlist in print;
- Write the books you want to write, and not the books publishing bean-counters think will sell;
- Connect with your readers directly, and know you're free to keep writing what they like;
- Own your own work, your own business and your own future...

...Then you want to self-publish. **First, not after publishers have tied up years worth of your work** while they publish it badly, promote it not at all, and never, ever send you money for what they do sell.

The second version of this question is, "When will I be ready to put my work out there?"

The answer to that one is, (as it was in the Commercial Publishing FAQ) **When your book is good enough.**

Only now, dammit, I can't default to the old Commercial Publishing answer of "you'll know it's good enough because it sells."

You need to know how to write well. Tell a good story. Revise your work.

It wouldn't hurt to have someone who has real professional qualifications as an editor dig into a manuscript and give it a deep, intense "here's what you did right, here's what you did wrong, and here's why" critique of your work. There are people you can pay to do this. The problem is that some of them are honest and legitimate, and some of them are scam artists, and I have no clue which are which.

I can teach you how to tell a good story and how to do professional revision on your work. This site is loaded with free articles and workshops, and if you're looking for in-depth step-by-step instruction on every aspect of writing professionally, I offer paid courses as well.

Here's the link:
<http://howtothinksideways.com/online-writing-courses/>.

My biggest courses include a private students-and-grads-only writers' community where you can meet other writers, trade crits, develop professional connections, and discover a multitude of skills and processes that will allow you to make your work publishable, and will give you connections to other folks who will not only read it and cheer you on, but help you promote it.

But to head off the question that does come, **I will not read your work—not even if you offer to pay me.** Not even if you offer to pay me a LOT (and I say this because there have been folks who raised the price offer to insane levels before finally believing me. This is not work I do, and I don't make exceptions.)

I make enough money to live on, so I don't have to take work that makes me unhappy. **I am only happy when I am creating;** editing and critting make me miserable beyond words. There are

folks who love to edit and crit. It would be worth your while to find one of them who is both skilled and honest, and to pay him for his time.

Do you need an agent if you self-publish?

Depends. Mostly, no—but if you suddenly find yourself faced with an offer of movie rights, or a Commercial Publisher wants to buy print rights to your work, or, if anything else happens and you're interested in saying yes, but there are contracts involved, YOU NEED AN AGENT.

Do you need an editor if you self-publish?

Unless you are a skilled professional editor and a copy-editor, yes. You need another set of eyes on your work to find both the sloppy and the dumb. And I say this as someone who has writing a whole lotta fiction and a whole lotta nonfiction. You are going to make mistakes, and you are going to overlook them in your own edits.

Sane doctors don't do surgery on themselves.

Sane lawyers don't represent themselves in court.

And sane writers get a qualified second set of eyes to read what they've done.

Can you recommend an editor or an agent?

No. Again—there are tons of folks out there who present themselves as agents and as editors. And some are legit, and some are crooks. I don't know which are which. My agent is a Commercial Publishing agent, my editors have all been Commercial Publishing editors, and they won't be available for self-publishers—because self-publishing has not equaled the overall quality and consistency (and massive sales numbers) of Commercial Publishing and by doing so proven that it is Real Publishing.

This sucks. It is, as of 2011, still the way things are.

When you buy e-books you love on your Kindle-Nook-iPad-whatever, e-mail the author and ask who he or she used, and whether the writer would recommend this editor again. Right now, word of mouth is all we as self-publishers have.

Can you recommend a book packager?

YES. (Good news at last, hey?)

I use **Booknook.biz**, and I have been thrilled with the quality of their work, their work ethic, their commitment to getting the job done right and on time, and their integrity. They are REAL packagers—you pay them for their work, and you own EVERYTHING about your book when they're done.

Are there other great Self-Publishing packagers out there? I'm sure there are. I got so lucky on my first shot, though, I have had no reason to look elsewhere.

Added a bunch of years later: If you have a Mac, there's good software now that lets you do it yourself and end up with a professional result, if you're willing to put in a LOT of work on your end. **Booknook.biz** remains the solid option if you're not excited about getting your hands dirty.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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