

FAQS About Money (Legacy-Publishing Writers)

By Holly Lisle

PLEASE NOTE that this page ONLY refers to selling your work through a commercial publisher. Self-publishers want this page.

- How much should I pay to get my book published?
 - How much should I charge for my book?
 - How much money do writers make?
 - How much money do you make?
 - How do writers get paid?
 - How do you run a household while writing full-time?
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How much should I pay to get my book published?

Nothing. Not a dime, not half the expenses, not “a modest sum,” not anything. Not ever. You don’t pay to have your book published. The reason you don’t pay to have your book published is as follows: If you’re a writer, then writing is your job. People get paid to do their jobs—nurses get paid to nurse, ditchdiggers get paid to dig ditches, and writers get paid to write.

Writers get paid to write.

Writers get paid to write.

Repeat this until it sticks.

Real publishers pay writers an advance. It may not be much of an advance, or it may be more money than you would know what

to do with (though I'm sure you would think of something) but they pay. They pay because they believe in your book, and they believe they can sell it and make a profit from it, and they are willing to invest in a product they believe in. They will also pay royalties against the advance, and they will pay extra for subsidiary rights, or else you will hang on to those rights to resell later.

The publishers who are actively soliciting for your manuscript in the backs of magazines, and who pretend to evaluate your manuscript when you send it to them, and who cheerfully write back to you that they are thrilled to accept your wonderful manuscript, and that you will have 10,000 lovely books printed with beautiful covers, professional design, and all you have to do is send them \$4000 so that they can start you on the road to being an author, are NOT REAL PUBLISHERS. They are not starting you on the road to being an author. They will publish anything, because the only thing they believe in is your money. They are lightening your pocket of \$4000 to print books that you will not be able to get distributed by bookstores, advertised by marketing departments, or sold. If you deal with such a publisher, you are buying 10,000 (or however many) books that you can use to insulate your basement or give away to friends who will politely accept them and then not read them. And I hope you have a lot of friends. If you pay to have your book published, you aren't really published.

There are two exceptions to the Never Pay To Have Your Book Published rule. The first is if you are well-entrenched in the lecture circuit and you need to have a non-fiction, topic-related book to sell along with your lectures. In this case, go ahead and pay a subsidy publisher to make your book for you. Market it yourself, keep track of your income from it, promote yourself and your lectures mercilessly, and if you do well enough, you may be able to get a real publisher to publish it and distribute it nationwide.

The second time you might want to consider vanity presses is

if you want to put together a nice little book that you can give away to your family and friends, and you have the money to spend, and you are under no delusions that what you are doing is in any way related to being published, and you realize that vanity publication is, in the world of publishing, worse than having no publication history at all. If you really want to have a book with your name on it, and you have no interest in making money from writing, go ahead and pay someone to print your book. This is a legitimate route to consider if you're big in genealogy, for example, and you have your entire family tree mapped and you've written a family history. By all means have copies printed and give them to your relatives—this isn't the sort of book a publisher would ever print (unless you have some fascinating, famous relatives).

But otherwise, repeat after me: Writers get paid to write. Writers get paid

(For more on this, also check out [WriterBeware](#) [offsite, opens new window])

How much should I charge for my book?

I love this question. It is the flip side of “how much should I pay to have my book published?” The droll answer is “you should be so lucky...”

Again, this is not the way the business works. You want to have an agent represent you in the negotiation of how much you're going to get for your book (and how many rights you'll keep and how many you'll sell), but how much the publisher pays for the book is, in the end, entirely up to the publisher. Don't expect a fortune. Don't expect, in fact, to

make more than you would have made from flipping burgers part-time for the same number of hours of work for your first novel. \$250,000 first-novel advances like the one my first agent, Russ Galen, got for Terry Goodkind are rare indeed. Much more typical is the \$5000 I got for my first book, back before I had an agent.

How much money do writers make?

Mostly not as much as we'd like, though I doubt if either Grisham or King has any complaints. The majority of writers don't make any money at all, or so little that they can't count on it for anything more than taking the kids out for a treat now and then. Most writers don't make a living from their writing, ever.

Looked at in the greater scheme of things, though, most ice skaters never skate in the Olympics, most football players never play in the Superbowl, and most violinists never fiddle in Carnegie Hall. I like your odds of making it as a pro writer a lot better than your odds of making it as a pro football player. You have much more control of your outcome, and you won't age out just as you're starting to get good. And knees are never an issue for a writer.

For those writers who do go pro, money ranges from "starving in a trailer park" to "opulent beyond your wildest dreams of avarice." Assume that there are more "starving in a trailer park" writers than "rolling in the salad" writers and you'll be right. Assume that if you go for this, you'll be one of the former for at least a while. The cool thing about writing is that you always have a chance to become one of the latter.

How much money do you make?

My mother always told me it wasn't polite to ask about people's sex lives or how much money they make – and all I can say is that my mail is proof that a lot of people out there weren't raised by my mother.

The answer I'll give: I'm not a "starving in a trailer park" writer anymore (though I did spend my share of time there), but Grisham doesn't need to give me the name of his tax attorney yet.

How do writers get paid?

Infrequently, irregularly, and usually late.

Okay, that's not really as specific as you wanted, was it?

Writers get paid advances, royalties, and "other". I'll discuss advances first. The writer will get a portion of his advance when he signs his contract. He sometimes gets paid another part of the advance when he finishes the first half of the book, paid more of the advance when he turns in the completed manuscript, and sometimes more again when the book is published. A good agent works out the details of how advances come to the writer. There are details like front-ending, back-ending, and the avoidance of basket accounting, etc., that all come within the purview of the advance, and which are best dealt with by you and your agent discussing your needs and your agent going to bat for you to try to see that they get met.

Royalties are in the hands of the publisher, and if you ever see them (and don't assume that you will – most novels never earn out their advance), you will wait a long time before you do. The usual scheme for the payment of royalties goes like

this. The publisher agrees to pay royalties in the first accounting period that comes after the end of the first full year after the book's publication. So if your book is published in January 1998 and your publisher's accounting periods are June and December, you might be able to hope for a royalty statement in June of 1999. Maybe.

Don't spend the money yet, though. Royalties are figured "against the advance," meaning that your book has to have earned the publisher enough money that he has already made back your advance from sales before your royalty clock starts ticking. Now, if you got paid a \$5000 advance on your first book, the publisher doesn't figure out that he has made back your advance when he sells \$5000 worth of books, or even when he has made a net profit (as opposed to gross sales) of \$5000. He figures that advance when he has sold enough books that he's made back your advance **out of your royalty percentage**.

Assuming you had a mass market paperback release of your novel and got a relatively standard first novelist's 6% royalty agreement in your contract (this is not good – it's just common), here's what you're looking at. The publisher has to sell a minimum of \$83,333 worth of your book before you'll see a dime of royalty money. If your first novel costs \$6, he has to sell 13,888 books, right? That doesn't seem so bad.

But it's not even that easy. Your publisher will probably do a print run of around 30,000 books for a first novel. That's about average for a mass market original (a paperback that has never been printed in hardcover or trade paper). If the publisher's reps pitch your title pretty well, he may ship most of those copies to bookstores. Some of them he may give away for free to reviewers and others who might want to sell the book, but the number of gimmes is never very high. Assume you have a first shipping of 26,000 copies. (This is a bit optimistic, but not extreme). If publishing were a kinder and gentler industry, you would have to sell slightly more than half of all the books that shipped at full price (no

remainders – you don't get paid for those) . . . and you would have to do it before bookstores start ripping the front cover off the remainder of their copies and returning them. In a lot of cases, you have about a month. But it isn't a kinder and gentler business. You have something even tougher to contend with, and here's where things get grim.

Publishers have a "reserve against returns" clause that allows them to not count a percentage of your sales because they will use those sales as a buffer against the inevitable returns. Bookstores order titles with a right to return unsold merchandise, but the only part of mass market originals that they return is the front cover. The rest of the book is destroyed. Returns cut seriously into a publisher's profit – he still paid for those books to be printed and shipped after all. Some of your books will be returned; this is a fact of publishing. The publisher knows it, and you had better know it, too. His reserve against returns in your royalty statement can run from a low of ten percent to a high of fifty or sixty percent. This means that you have to sell up to twice as many books in order to start earning royalties. And returns for most first novels are higher than fifty percent. In most cases, much higher.

So if more than fifty percent of your books are destroyed before anyone has a chance to buy them, and if you don't see any royalties until you've sold anywhere from sixty to one hundred percent of your first shipping, how are you ever going to make any money?

You aren't. This is why most writers have a day job. In order to make money, you have to have a high sell-through (the percentage of books your publisher ships minus the percentage of books the bookstores return) and you have to have fairly good-sized print runs. Your publisher has to be willing to keep you in stock – to gamble on the fact that bookstores will keep ordering your older work, and that people will keep buying it. You have to sell the copies of your book quickly,

you have to stake out shelf space in chains that prefer to return (destroy) older titles to make space for newer ones, you have to build a reader following, and you have to add new titles to your list on a regular basis in order to give the stores a reason to keep up your backlist (the older books you've written).

Authors whose first three or so books have returns of fifty percent or more are out of the game. Publishers will stop buying from them – not just your current publisher, but also the other publishers you might hope to sell to. Because if you have a publishing history, the first thing any prospective publisher will want to see is your numbers – your print runs, your returns, your total sales, and especially your sell-through. If your sell-through with your old publisher was less than fifty percent, a new publisher will turn you down. Maybe not your book, if he really loves it, but you. This is where pen names can be useful – more than one author with bad numbers has started over with a new name, in essence becoming a first novelist again and acquiring a clean publishing history in the process. It's a bit like being able to become a virgin all over again – but still getting to keep your experience. Which is another reason why writing is a better career choice than pro sports.

So how much of the publication process do you control? You control the quality of the books you write and how frequently you write them. All else is in the hands of an industry where the odds are stacked heavily against you.

This is why most writers are a little crazy. If God owes you any favors, the time to call them in is when you start publishing.

And finally, a discussion of "other" money. From time to time, your agent will send you checks you didn't know were coming. These occur because he's been quietly selling subsidiary rights to your backlist books while you were plugging away at

the new project at home. These include foreign rights, book club rights, movie rights, book-on-tape rights, and who knows what else. If you managed to hang on to most of your rights, and if your agent has been talented and fortunate enough to sell them, you'll occasionally open the mailbox to discover a nice surprise. Sometimes a very nice surprise.

This is one of the things that keeps us crazy writers from doing the otherwise drastic and sometimes irrevocable. And no, I'm not talking about suicide. I'm talking about going out and finding the sort of job your mother wishes you had. You can't count on this money. You can't even really hope for it. But when it falls on your head, it sure is nice to get.

How do you run a household while writing full-time?

[The writer sits with her eyes closed for just a moment, pondering.]

If you've read the rest of the money questions, you know how hairy the money situation for writers can be. Usually is. Almost always is. [The writer winces and wishes you hadn't asked].

If you're going to write, the safest way to run a household would be to either have a full-time job of your own or to be sharing income responsibilities with someone who is A) very understanding and B) employed in a safe, regular-hours, high-paying job that covers all of your expenses and at least some of your desires.

But most of us who write don't want to keep our day job. We dream of writing as a way out – a way out of low-paying, dangerous or depressing jobs that are all we can get, or out

of work that takes us away from our homes or families, or out of the soul-tearing frazzle of hectic, frantic, high-pressure employment. Or perhaps we have physical handicaps that prevent other forms of work. It may be a way out of poverty. A way out of rote. A way out of feeling insignificant.

For me, back a few years when I was recently divorced with two small children, with no child support or alimony, and with a job as a registered nurse, writing was the way I was going to be able to get out of my income-limited and dangerous nursing job (you make enough money as a staff RN that you can survive on your own and feed your children, but you know that the life you're living isn't going to ever be much better than it is at the moment when you're looking at your options), to be home for my kids all the time, and to still have a chance to radically change my standard of living for the better.

I do write full-time and have been doing so since 1992, and my household has no other source of income. This is how I did it.

- I wrote every day.
- I sent stuff out as often as I could.
- I spent less than I made.
- I never used credit (credit cards are the path to destruction for a writer – something I discovered once I'd “made it” but after hard times returned).
- I reused, used up, and made do.
- I banished television from the house, so that the time I had with the kids I actually spent with them.
- I never gave up on my dream.
- I never quit.

If your eyes paused on the little phrase above – “after hard times returned” – you have good instincts. If they didn't, you aren't paranoid enough yet. A writer is only as secure as his last book's sales, and the publishing industry has a short memory. You can never breathe easy until you have enough money in secure long-term investments that you're living off the

interest. I'm not close. Frankly, I'm not even in the "breathing-easy" ballgame yet. If at any point in the game I have three consecutive books that tank, I'm going to be in the line of writers who have to change their names in order to sell, just like the beginner who has the same thing happen. I have the advantages of having had some success, and having a good agent – so with a different name I will probably be able to sell new work. But there are no guarantees. Not ever. No matter how good I am, or how prolific, or how dedicated. Making a living from writing is living on the edge of somebody else's calculator, and the numbers on that calculator are hard and cold and they know no mercy.

If you're smart (I wasn't for a while, but a couple of very rough years gave me back my brains) you'll never break the rules I listed above. If you do break them, you'll probably live to regret it.

And now you're thinking, "Why would any human being **do** this?"

Since I quit my day job, I've been broke quite a few times; I've been flush quite a few times. But no matter how rough things got, my kids had food every day and a roof over their heads, and writing has given me relationships with them that I couldn't have had any other way. Writing has given me friendships and challenges that I never could have imagined. It has opened doors, let me reach out to people, let me touch lives. I have seen places I would never have gone to otherwise. I have done things I would never have had the courage to try otherwise.

My life is an adventure, and almost every morning I wake up amazed that I'm the lucky shmuck who gets to do this for a living. Yep – even when I'm broke. Writing is hairy and scary and uncertain, but it's also wonderful and thrilling and a hell of a lot of fun. If I could be anyone in the world doing anything in the world, I wouldn't be Stephen King or Dean Koontz or John Grisham with all their success and all their

money . . . I'd be me, and I'd be doing this. Right here, right now, making it on my own and climbing the mountain by myself.

What else could anyone ask for?

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. Learn how writing fiction for a living really works.

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