



Publishing Options

How to Choose the Best Method for Publishing Your Book

By Michael J. Dowling

About the Author

Michael J. Dowling helps thought leaders and other professionals write and publish non-fiction books to accomplish their goals and advance their careers.

Today, authors must sort through a multitude of options that were unavailable a mere ten years ago.

So, you've decided to write a book.

How do you plan to publish it? Will you self-publish, look for a traditional publisher, or use a subsidy publisher? It's wise to make this decision early in the writing process.

Advances in printing technology and the advent of the Internet have dramatically changed the publishing landscape. The boundaries between publishing, printing, distribution, and retailing are disappearing. For example, Amazon.com started as a book retailer and now provides printing, self-publishing, and traditional publishing.

Today, authors must sort through a multitude of options that were unavailable a mere ten years ago. New technologies, such as e-books and POD (print on demand), add to the complexity.

This paper briefly describes the advantages and disadvantages of the three primary publishing alternatives available to authors: *traditional publishing*, *self-publishing*, *subsidy publishing*, and *hybrid publishing*. After reading it, you will be in a better position to choose the best option for your book.

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Traditional Publishing

Traditional publishing (sometimes called “royalty publishing”) for many years was the industry standard. Under this arrangement, the author finds a publisher, often with the help of an agent. Once the author’s manuscript has been accepted, the publisher will handle production and distribution. The author receives royalties, generally in the range of 10 percent of the book’s sales revenues.

A few of the larger traditional publishers are household names, but many mid-size traditional publishers also have outstanding reputations. When selling to a niche market, a smaller publisher may be the best choice.

“If you want to succeed in a creative field these days, you’d better be good at something else besides the creativity or you’re not going to make it...Writers need to start thinking less like writers and more like businesspeople.”

Peter Bowerman, author of The Well-Fed Self-Publisher

Advantages of traditional publishing:

- With traditional publishing, the publisher covers all costs of producing and distributing the book. In addition, the publisher will usually pay an advance on royalties, so the author will have some income even before the book is written.
- Traditional publishing can bring an author greater prestige and credibility than the other options. However, the increased popularity and respectability of self-publishing in recent years has diminished this advantage.
- A traditional publisher’s established distribution channels can provide a significant benefit. However, this advantage has become less significant as more and more books are sold on the Internet and as e-books.

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- The turnkey services provided by traditional publishers can be a significant advantage to authors who don't want to spend time and energy on book production.

Disadvantages of traditional publishing:

“The prestige enjoyed by the published author is unparalleled in our society. A book can bring recognition, wealth and acceleration in one’s career.”

Dan Poynter, author of Dan Poynter’s Self-Publishing Manual

- Traditional publishers are reluctant to take risks with unknown authors. Unless a book has big sales potential and the author has a significant platform (name recognition, professional position, or other asset that provides visibility and credibility with the book’s target audience), it may be difficult to interest a traditional publisher.
- Many traditional publishers accept only agented submissions, and securing an agent can be as difficult as securing a publisher.
- It requires considerably more time to bring a book to market through traditional publishing than through self-publishing.
- Most traditionally published books pay their authors only modest amounts in royalties. In fact, the majority of books do not sell enough copies to earn out the advance. In other words, the publisher ends up paying the author the advance and no more. That’s one reason why some established authors are turning down offers from traditional publishers in favor of self-publishing.

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“More and more authors are opting to go solo, creating their own publishing houses. Why—simply this: It’s about quality; it’s about timing’ it’s about control; and it’s about money.”

*Briles, Frishman & Kremer,
co-authors of Show Me
about Book Publishing*

- A traditional publisher owns the book’s ISBN (International Standard Book Number), which means the publisher has substantial control. If the publisher makes decisions the author doesn’t agree with (cover design, marketing approach, etc.), or if the publisher does a poor job of marketing the book, the author often has little leverage to make a change.
- If the book sells poorly within the first six months, the publisher may take it out of print. Considerable time may pass before the rights revert to the author.
- Authors who wish to purchase copies of their book from the publisher for promotional use (e.g., to sell at talks and seminars) may find that the price charged by the publisher is considerably higher than the actual printing cost.
- A traditional publishing contract may not give the author sufficient flexibility to bring out special editions of the book or to produce personal collateral material.

Self-Publishing (also called “Independent Publishing”)

Self-publishing is becoming increasingly popular, for reasons outlined below. It can be a very attractive option when the book has a niche market and the author has money to invest in its production and distribution.

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Advantages of self-publishing:

- Self-publishing gives the author control over all editorial, design, and business decisions.
- Self-publishing is the fastest way to get a book to market.
- Because the author gets to keep the difference between the book's printing cost and book's selling price, this option can potentially produce the highest ROI.

Disadvantages of self-publishing:

- The author must typically invest a minimum of \$3,000 for production of the book (cover design, interior layout, ISBNs, initial modest print run, etc.).
- The author should know or be willing to learn a reasonable amount about self-publishing. An alternative is to hire an experienced professional to serve as the book shepherd (also called a book packager or a book developer). Some ghostwriters and editors offer this service.
- The author needs to arrange for marketing and distribution of the book, and to handle other business affairs in connection with it.
- A self-published author is essentially an entrepreneur. The potentially higher rewards are accompanied by potentially higher risks.

“Today self-publishers must sort through a multitude of options that were unavailable a mere five years ago. Largely as a result of these changes, self-publishing is ascending in popularity and acceptance. Traditional publishers are being challenged to adapt to the new realities.”

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Subsidy Publishing

Subsidy publishing occupies the middle ground between traditional publishing and self-publishing. Like traditional publishers, subsidy publishers accept submissions from authors, handle all aspects of production (plus distribution in most cases), and pay royalties based on sales. But unlike traditional publishers, they make most of their money on sales of the author's book to the author, rather than on sales of the author's book to the public.

"In a 2006 article in the Times (Great Britain), the founder of subsidy publisher Lulu stated that the company's goal is "... to have a million authors selling 100 copies each, rather than 100 authors selling a million copies each."

Advantages of subsidy publishing:

- In contrast to traditional publishers, most subsidy publishers are actively looking for authors. Although some portray themselves as highly selective, the majority eagerly accept submissions.
- Subsidy publishing requires less upfront cash from the author than self-publishing, because subsidy publishers underwrite (subsidize) some of the production costs (cover design, interior layout, printing, etc.).
- The turnkey book production services offered by subsidy publishers are a benefit if the author doesn't want to or have the time to learn about the self-publishing process.
- The established distribution networks and marketing programs of some subsidy publishers can be an asset.

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- Subsidy publishers typically pay royalties to the author at higher percentage rates than traditional publishers, and they generally bring books to market faster.

Disadvantages of subsidy publishing:

“If you follow the tips in this book, and your book takes off through your marketing efforts, you can pull it from the self-publishing (i.e., subsidy publishing) company and publish it on your own (and keep 100% of the profits) or shop it around to agents and traditional publishers.”

Mark Levine, author of The Fine Print of Self-Publishing

- Some subsidy publishers produce books of inferior quality, using standard templates and sub-standard workmanship.
- Important aspects of the publishing process may be out of your control. For instance, the subsidy publisher frequently establishes the book’s selling price. If the price is set too high for effective sales, the author suffers.
- If you want copies of your book to sell at speaking engagements or for other purposes, you must buy them from the subsidy publisher at prices considerably in excess of the actual printing cost.
- Although many subsidy publishers will promise to sell your book to the general public, the results may be disappointing. Often their marketing services are cookie-cutter approaches that are less effective than the custom services you could arrange on your own.
- Subsidy publishers tend to have a difficult time getting reviews from industry sources like *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, and major newspapers. The word is out that the quality of some subsidy publishers is not up to standard.

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“Unlike traditional publishers, subsidy publishers make most of their money on sales of the author’s book to the author, rather than on sales of the author’s book to the public.”

- After enticing aspiring authors to pursue their dreams with promises about marketing and other services, a few subsidy publishers will employ “bait and switch” tactics by adding additional costs to the project and renegeing on some promises.
- The ISBN assigned to your book will belong to the subsidy publisher, not to you. If you want to change publishers, you will need to get a new ISBN. Changing ISBNs can cause confusion and depress sales.
- If you’re unhappy with the subsidy publisher you’ve chosen, the terms of your contract may make it difficult for you to go elsewhere. To further lock in authors, some publishers put watermarks on every page of the PDF files, so they’re not useable by others. They may also refuse to release artwork.

Hybrid Publishing

Hybrid publishers provide services much like a subsidy publisher, and they earn most of their income by charging the author for services performed. They may also earn income by charging a fee based on a modest percentage of book revenues.

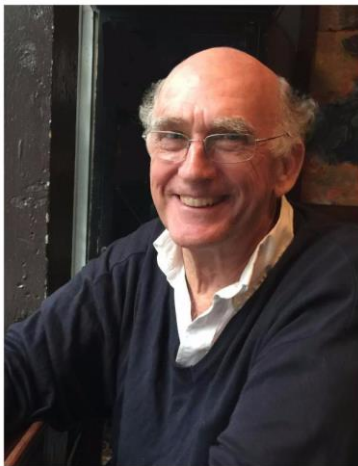
Depending on the publisher, hybrid publishing can be an attractive alternative to subsidy publishing, especially if the author retains all rights to the book.

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About the Author



Michael J. Dowling is an award-winning ghostwriter and editor who helps business executives, consultants, and other thought leaders write and publish books and paper that accomplish their goals and advance their careers. He offers turnkey services that make the writing and publishing process understandable, cost-effective, time-efficient, and enjoyable for his clients.

Michael earned an MBA degree from Columbia Business School, where he was a Harriman Scholar, and a Bachelor of Science degree with honors from the University of Florida. Prior to founding Wool Street Writers in 2000, he served as president of an educational publishing company, president of a national gift company, and administrator of a 1000-member church.

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