

Self-Publishing and Vanity Presses

Vanity presses have earned a reputation as overpriced ways of becoming “published.” Nevertheless, self-publishing has a long and distinguished history and should be considered an option for any writing effort. Many authors have found self-publication worth the cost to them:

- A person who has written a book and who gives lectures on that book’s topic can find self-publication to be financially rewarding—the 80% profit from sales of self-published books is better than the 8 to 15% royalty from publishing houses. This is equally true for motivational speakers on the national circuit or people who give lectures in local venues, historical societies, garden clubs, or fraternal organizations.
- An established author might also find self-publication economically advantageous. Certain major authors—from Stephen King to Joanne Dobson—have experimented with it, believing that their readers will follow them to Amazon or other Internet sites.
- Many people do not see their work making a big financial splash but want to make information available for a specific purpose. Examples might include a family’s genealogical history, a private collection of poems or essays, a philosophical or political treatise, etc. These works do not have the panache to attract commercial publishers but they still should be published—and self-publication can achieve this end.

In these situations, review your goals for the book as if you were the publisher—as indeed you are! Like any other publisher, you have to balance your resources with your desire for quality and plan to make your book the best publication for meeting your goals at the least cost.

Functional costs within publishing

The costs for self-publishing are widely variable: you may want to go with the bare bones of stapled-together pages from MSWord, or you may want something more professional or more glitzy. The choice is truly yours.

Here are some of the costs to consider.

Manuscript development

REVIEWS: It’s unlikely that you will want or need professional reviews, but honoraria range from fifty to several

hundred dollars, depending on the talents of the reviewer, the depth of the review, and the use that you will make of it.

EDITING: Costs for editing depend on the amount of work required and the expertise needed for your book. A light edit might cost around \$8 per 1000 words; a heavy copyedit on an academic subject might cost \$15 per 1000 words; and material requiring special technical knowledge may cost still more.

Professional editors will know and follow the standard style manual for each specific market, and a widely accepted general standard is the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

Production

DESIGN: Most self-published books are not formally designed, but you might want to collect copies of book designs that appeal to you if you are planning to have your book typeset.

A simple design may cost up to \$200, and a more complex design \$1000 or more depending on the time required to create complete specifications.

TYPESETTING: Professional typesetting of a standard 6" × 9" text from correctly prepared disks and without art or tables generally will cost from \$3 to \$4 per book page. Typesetting a 240-page novel could therefore cost about \$850.

Additional costs are incurred by the use of a second color, the inclusion of tables, art, foot-of-page notes, and use of 2 columns per page.

Would the professional appearance resulting from these expenditures increase your personal satisfaction, the audience’s pleasure, and help you meet your marketing hopes?

PROOFREADING: Experienced authors know better than to depend on their own eyes to see what’s in print rather than what they expect to be there. Professional proofreaders provide fresh eyes to your book project, find small and egregious errors, and protect you from embarrassment—all worth the cost of \$2 to \$3 per page.

INDEXING: If your book is full of important names, dates, and concepts that a reader will want to find directly without having to scan each page, you might consider having an index compiled. The cost will depend on the density and complexity of the material, starting at about \$2.50 per page.

COVER DESIGN: An imaginative cover design might well be the difference between success and failure for a book. Commercial publishers generally pay well over \$1000 for a commercial cover design, but with digital cameras and Photoshop, an artistic person may be able to execute a cover and significantly reduce your cost for an appropriate or imaginative cover design.

ISBN: If you intend to have your book sold through bookstores (physical or online), you will need to purchase an International Standard Book Number (the bar code printed on the back cover of books). This allows booksellers and libraries to identify, order, stock, and sell the book. It can be arranged by a typesetter or printer.

Manufacturing

PRINTING: The traditional standard is offset printing using large equipment suitable only for printing over 1000 copies.

Digital printing allows you to print smaller quantities, meet your quality requirements, and provide quick turnaround times. It can be used economically for runs of a few dozen to several hundred, eliminating the need for warehouse space or large cash outlays. You can print one hundred 240-page books with a 4-color cover for about \$500. You can use the same file as a source of print-on-demand publication through Kinkos or other duplicating services.

A word of alert: Amazon promises to help you market and distribute through their Website in an on-demand manner, but for this service you have to assign your work to them—in effect giving them the power of a traditional publisher.

BINDING: You'll have to decide if you want a traditional book, bound as a hard cover or paperback, or if a specialty binding is warranted. Is it a cookbook that needs to open flat so readers can refer to a recipe as they follow the steps? Do readers need to write in the book as they read?

Most printers include the cost of a soft-cover binding in the cost of printing. However, specialty bindings will raise the costs quoted above.

Post-publication activities and costs

COPYRIGHT REGISTRATION: Your material is automatically protected as yours upon completion of the work, but to fight any copyright infringement in a court of law, you must register it with the U.S. Copyright Office.

DISTRIBUTION: How will your books physically get into the hands of those who will read it? In person, by mail, through retail outlets, or by download? It is unlikely that traditional bookstores will carry self-published books.

SALES AND MARKETING: The hardest part of self-publishing is selling. If you want to make income from your work and opt to self-publish, you must be willing to commit substantial time and effort to publicize and promote your book. There are some distribution agencies (Amazon is one) who will undertake some marketing activity on your behalf.

RETURNS: Traditional publishers have established policies for books sold but then returned: Will you accept no returns? A time limit for returns? Books only in pristine condition that can be resold? Think it through before you need to have your policy in place.

SALES TAX: Selling your book to the consumer will require you to obtain a sales tax number from the state department of taxation and be responsible for collecting and reporting quarterly sales tax to the state (this is separate from your income tax). On the other hand, you can sell only to retailers and have them handle the tax headaches.

Other warnings

There are companies that provide self-publishing services—with minimal or no marketing—for a contract fee. Some require that you purchase a minimum number of copies; some offer print-on-demand (POD) services with no minimum quantity. Read the contract very carefully before committing yourself.

If your goal is to meet a lifetime dream, you should consider self-publishing. However, go into this business with an eye to costs and rewards and make sure you completely understand your rights and responsibilities!

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