

# What type of deal is **that**?

A no-nonsense introduction  
to the pros, cons and gotchas  
of five publishing approaches



[societyofauthors.org](http://societyofauthors.org)

# About this guide

**There is no absolute right or wrong way to publish a book. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. This guide is a brief introduction to five of them.**

Some approaches will pay you up front, while others will require an investment from you, or a fundraising effort. With some, you will hand over some of the control of and rights to your work to a wider publishing team, while for others you will be in the driving seat and responsible for the entire process. Some will result in a print run of hundreds or thousands of physical copies, while others will result in a single copy being printed only when a customer places an order, or a digital or audio-only book with no physical copies at all.

The publishing approach you should take will depend on the nature of your book, what you hope to achieve with it, your priorities, expectations and budget, your existing relationship or reputation with your potential readers, and many other factors. Feel free to discuss your options with our experienced advice team.

This guide is a basic introduction to the most common publishing options. It is not designed to promote one approach over another, but it should help you consider which approach might be the best fit for you and your work. It might also help you to develop a strategy for promoting your work, so that if one approach does not work out, you have an alternative ready.

No matter how your book is published, you will be required to enter into one or more contractual agreements. Keep in mind that publishing contracts are detailed, legally binding documents. The information about each of the approaches is not exhaustive or definitive, and we urge you to take professional advice – from an agent, a lawyer with knowledge of the book industry, or from the Society of Authors' dedicated team of contract advisors. **For more, visit [societyofauthors.org](https://societyofauthors.org).**

## What do you want from publication?

Before you enter any deal you should consider what you expect to achieve from your work being published. How can each publishing approach meet those expectations? Whether your priority is financial return, being widely read, read by a specialist audience of peers, or simply seeing your name in print, you should think through how each type of deal might match those priorities.

If you have been offered a deal:

- Research the deal properly before committing. Look at the options and compare models, prices, and rights you will be granting. Talk to other authors and read reviews about the approach and organisation you are in contact with.
- Ensure that any deal is transparent and abides by our CREATOR guidelines for fair and clear contract terms - [societyofauthors.org/where-we-stand](https://societyofauthors.org/where-we-stand).
- Ask questions about an organisation's publishing model and terms. It should either be willing to negotiate or make clear the terms are non-negotiable. Both you and the organisation are professionals and no legitimate professional objects to respectful questioning and negotiation.

- Be sure you understand what you are signing before you commit to it. We urge you to take professional advice – from an agent, a lawyer with knowledge of the book industry, or from the Society of Authors’ dedicated team of contracts advisors.

## What do organisations want from you?

Typically, when you work with an organisation to publish your book – whether it is a publisher or a provider of publishing services – it will be aiming to ensure its income exceeds expenditure by as wide a margin as possible. Its aim is to profit from its relationship with you and your work.

It will do that by acquiring as much benefit as possible for the lowest possible outlay. Benefits it acquires from you might be rights to your work, or money. Benefits it gives you might be publishing services or financial advances.

A publishing deal is a negotiation. It is in your interest to ensure that you give as little as possible for the highest possible benefit.

The rights you own in your work are valuable. Do not give away more than you must, for any longer than you must.

## Five types of deal

### One. ‘Traditional’ / conventional publishing

A deal with a ‘traditional’ or conventional publisher will make an identifiable and significant up-front investment in your work.

They will usually pay you an advance against future royalties earned.

They will meet the costs of editing, illustration, design, production, marketing and distribution. You will be working with a team of experienced professionals in each of these areas. They will specify the size of any initial print-run.

### Advantages

- A traditional publisher will provide all the services necessary to edit, produce, market and distribute your work. They should have editing, design and production skills, as well as active, experienced rights departments with established connections in other markets.
- They put up the money and will usually pay you an advance.
- You will be supported by a team of professionals, each taking care of a specific aspect of your book.
- There is commercial value in the brand of being published by a highly regarded imprint with a wide distribution network.
- They handle financial matters such as sales, returns, bad debt, tax implications when dealing with foreign publishers.
- You should be able to focus more of your time on your writing, while your publisher does its best to make your book a success.

- The big publishing houses are some of the most rigorous pursuers of book pirates, which works to the benefit of all authors and publishers.

## Disadvantages

- Many conventional publishers will only accept manuscript submissions via a literary agent, which can be a major challenge in itself.
- You will surrender at least some control over how your book is transformed from manuscript to product, and how it is sold.
- If you are unhappy with your publisher, it may be difficult to extricate yourself from your contract and have the rights in your work returned to you.
- Conventional publishers will often attempt to secure more rights in your work than they will ever use.
- Publishing processes and accounting can be complex and are often opaque.
- Your share of the return may be low, typically a small proportion of the selling price of the work.

## Key points to watch for

- You should aim to obtain as large an advance as possible. The more a publisher spends at the outset, the greater its incentive to recoup that investment.
- There should be specific promises on what the publisher will do, including a marketing plan.
- The publisher should take only those rights it is in a good position to exploit. You should generally hold back dramatisation, documentary and performance rights in all media.
- You should negotiate the right to reclaim other specific rights if a publisher fails to exploit them.
- You should be able to terminate the contract if, after an agreed period, the work becomes available only as print-on-demand/ebook and sales are insignificant, meaning the publisher is no longer investing in the work.

## Two. Self-publishing / indy publishing

When you self-publish, you will make any initial up-front investment required to publish, promote and distribute your work. You will be responsible for managing the entire process – deciding on formats for your book and methods of distribution, or commissioning others to manage it for you. You will begin to recoup your investment only when sales are made. Due to progress in digital publishing technology and a well-established self-publishing services industry, self-publishing can be a relatively inexpensive way to publish your work and it allows you to keep all your rights.

## Advantages

- There are many excellent resources available, many created by successful self-published authors, to help you get started.

- Flexibility and control – you will have absolute control of the product. You will be able to set the recommended retail price, design or choose your own cover, produce a revised edition, or alter the retail price, at will.
- You can choose which format(s) your book will be available in, including ebook, print on demand, fixed print run, audiobook, or web based.
- You can control where your book can be ordered from, including online retailers and subscription websites, physical bookshops, and online publishing platforms.
- You keep all the profits after the platform or distributor has taken its share.
- A publisher handles hundreds of titles but you will be handling very few, all written by you, so you know them better and care more about them.
- For specialist non-fiction and niche subjects you may have a better knowledge of how to reach your potential readers than most publishers.
- You are not tied down. You can cease self-publishing at any time should a better offer come along.

## Disadvantages

- You will have to pay all the costs upfront and there is no guarantee of a return. Authors rarely recoup what they invest.
- Each format you publish in will require its own set of knowledge and skills to manage and market.
- It is not easy to attract readers and secure sales. There are millions of books available from the main online retailers. Inevitably, most struggle to have an impact on readers. This is the case for any publishing approach, but with self-publishing those sales will depend entirely on your own efforts.
- You are responsible for everything, so you will need to decide what you do yourself (what is realistically within your skillset) and what you outsource. You can outsource specific services such as editing and cover design, or even use a full-service self-publishing company, but the more you outsource, the more you must spend.
- You need to keep proper accounts and know what laws apply to you.
- Managing self-publishing, particularly marketing and distribution eats into the time you would otherwise have devoted to writing your next book.

## Key points to watch for

- Many companies now offer full service self-publishing services. These are entirely different from Option 4. A self-publishing service will charge for the cost of their services, but they do not make any investment and they do not take any rights in your work or any share of the profits.
- When commissioning self-publishing services, whether discrete services such as editing or publicity, or full-service publishing, thoroughly research the person or organisation providing those services.
- Ask to see samples of their work, obtain quotes from other companies, and read reviews and get references from other users.

- Check that they have the experience and qualifications to provide the services on offer. The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) and the Society of Indexers have searchable directories of members.
- Search for the service on [www.writersandartists.co.uk](http://www.writersandartists.co.uk) or at [selfpublishingadvice.org/best-self-publishing-services](http://selfpublishingadvice.org/best-self-publishing-services).
- Before you commission any self-publishing service, ensure that you have a clear written agreement for what exactly they will do and at what cost.

### Three. Minimal investment publishing

A minimal investment publisher can seem much like ‘traditional’ / conventional publishing, but it is vastly different. There is little, if any, expenditure by the publisher, and there is no advance.

There may be no commitment to pre-print copies of your book, instead making them available as print-on-demand (POD) copies or ebooks.

Start-up and overhead costs are minimal, so anyone can set up as such a publisher, regardless of their financial stability, publishing credentials or business acumen.

#### Key points to watch for

- In return for minimal investment, the publisher may seek control over many of your rights, for as long as possible – and be entitled to a significant percentage of the income should any of those rights (through no effort of the publisher) become valuable.
- Even if the offer comes from what appears to be an established publisher, think carefully about whether/in exactly what ways their offer is a better option than self-publishing. If the publisher is bringing added value, be clear what that added value is and look out for vague or misleading undertakings which are not tangible commitments. Identify what exactly the publisher is undertaking to do that you cannot as easily do by self-publishing. You should grant the publisher no more than print and verbatim ebook rights in the English language, and no right to sub-license to other companies.
- You should consider whether the division of income is reasonable. If the publisher is doing little more than allowing POD and ebook producers (such as Amazon or Ingram Spark) to produce copies to order, it is unreasonable for it to take more than 20% of the income generated. For comparison, 15-20% is what a literary agent will charge for handling rights on your behalf.
- Be clear about when and how you can terminate the contract, and weigh that against the fact that if you self-publish you can cancel at any time, rarely with more than a few months’ notice.

### Four. Paid-for / ‘hybrid’ / ‘partnership’ publishing

**Read *Is it a steal?* our investigation into ‘hybrid’ / paid-for publishing, highlighting our concerns about this publishing model, and how we believe the organisations that offer it need to change. Download from [societyofauthors.org/IsItASteal](http://societyofauthors.org/IsItASteal)**

If you are paying money and granting the company a licence of rights and/or are promised royalties, you are dealing with a paid-for publisher. They use many terms to describe their model, including 'hybrid' and 'partnership' publishing, and some have much in common with what used to be known as vanity publishing.

The difference between this and self-publishing services is that, as well as you paying upfront, the publisher takes rights in your work.

Some paid-for publishers present themselves as traditional or conventional publishers and others as self-publishing services. Some market their services aggressively and are not transparent about their business model.

The money you pay may be for specific publishing services such as marketing or publicity, it may be general, or you may have to commit to buying a minimum number of books.

**We invariably advise authors against this method of publishing.**

## Key points to watch for

- You should not commit to paying any money until you are confident you know exactly what you are getting and how much it will cost. And consider it money spent - there is no certainty of any sales or royalty income, and the contract is unlikely to allow for a refund of any of your fee, whatever the circumstances.
- Production costs - unlike those of a conventional publisher - have already been met (by you), so there is little incentive for the publisher to spend money or effort trying to sell the work. Would self-publishing be a better approach?
- The top publishers are very picky about what they publish; if a company is advertising for authors or cold-calls you, it is probably more interested in your money than in the merit of your work.
- Some firms send writers excessively flattering reader reports (run off to a formula).
- If you pay a printer to produce copies of the book (self-publishing), you own those copies. When you pay a paid for publisher, you are not acquiring the books. The contract might entitle you to 10 'free' copies of your work - but if you want more, you will have to pay extra for them.
- Increasingly, paid for publishers only produce works as POD or ebook, which is of course the cheapest option for them. Watch the fine print. An undertaking to print 'up to 1,000 copies' is not a commitment to a 1,000-copy print run.
- You should thoroughly research the financial credentials of the publisher.
- You should ask to see other books it has produced, and its latest catalogue.
- Your rights may well be tied up for years. Ensure that there are fair reversion clauses without penalty.
- You are unlikely to receive reviews or wider publicity and your books will not be stocked in traditional bookshops. If there is a promise to promote or sell your work from the publisher's website, remember that probably the only visitors to that site will be other fee-paying authors.
- Many authors who sign such deals report spending a great deal of money and getting little but disappointment in return.

## Five. Crowdfunding publishers

In this section we are not talking about independently crowdfunding to raise funds for a book that you subsequently self-publish – an approach you might take to fund the self-publication of your work. We are referring to publishers whose business model involves the author raising the funds needed to publish their book.

In this model, crowdfunding is a pre-order process.

You pitch your idea for a book or a finished manuscript to a provider publishing platform. If they accept your book, you will be given access to fundraising facilities – usually a page on their website – where backers can show their support by financing your publication in exchange for a copy, acknowledgement, and other reward.

You will be set a target amount of money to raise. If you reach that figure the company will take your book into production. Models vary, but you will normally have to raise enough money to cover all production and other costs and will receive a royalty in return. The company will typically split the book's net profit 50/50 with you.

### Key points to watch for

- It is essential that you understand the deal and what value the publishing platform will be adding. Would it be better to crowdfund independently or simply borrow the money to self-publish?
- Most authors need to put in a huge effort to raise funds and reach their target. Do you have the time and skills to do that?
- Production costs – unlike those of a conventional publisher – have already been met (by your backers), so there is little incentive for the publishing platform to spend further money or effort trying to sell the work.
- Check the financial credentials of the platform. Ask to see examples of other books it has produced, and its latest catalogue. Ask for sales figures on other books.
- Your rights may well be tied up for many years. Ensure that there are fair reversion clauses without penalty.

## Last words

Whatever approach you take, make sure you understand what you are signing before you commit to it.

You should always take professional advice - either from an agent, a lawyer with knowledge of the book industry, or from the SoA's team of contracts advisors (free to all members).