

Vanity Publishing

If you are considering paying for publication, it would be rash to assume either that it is a way of making money or that it is a way to ensure that large numbers of people read your book.

Conventional Publishing

Conventional publishers publish your work at their expense under an exclusive licence covering a range of rights. They will meet all the costs of production from initial editing to warehousing and distribution. They will pay you royalties and have an incentive to sell copies in order to make a profit. The majority of books are published this way. Further information is given in our Quick Guide to Publishing Contracts, and the Society is happy to advise members on contracts.

Self-Publishing

You retain all your rights. In return for your payment you will receive an agreed number of copies in the paper, format, binding and design you specify. It will be up to you to store, market and distribute them. Beware: marketing and distribution are generally held to be by far the most difficult areas of publishing, especially self-publishing (see also the Society's Quick Guide to Marketing Your Book).

The success of the venture will depend on the nature of the book, and your ambitions for it. If you have written a book that is targeted at a specialised field, and you know where and how to sell it, self-publishing could be the answer. If you have written a family memoir, or a volume of highly personal poetry, for instance, and would like a limited number of attractive copies for friends and relations then, again, paying a good local printer to produce copies to your specifications may well be a sensible option.

There is a useful article on self-publishing in *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* (published by A & C Black, £12.99).

Vanity Publishing

The expression 'Vanity publishing' arises because some firms send writers excessively flattering reports on their typescripts. As in all areas of industry, there are better and worse vanity publishers. It can be confusing: vanity publishers do not call themselves that, but often talk about subsidy-, self- or cooperative-publishing. As a general rule, if a publisher is advertising for authors, it is probable that it will be seeking a large subvention from the writer.

Be clear about what your money is buying, and what your chances are of earning any of it back

If you pay a printer to produce copies of the book (self-publishing), you will end up owning those copies. When you pay a vanity publisher, you are not acquiring the books. They remain the property of the publisher. You will be asked to grant the publishers an exclusive licence to exploit the work. Your fee is for the costs of publication. The contract will probably entitle you to, say, 10 free copies of your work and the chance to buy more in return for (further) payment.

Increasingly, vanity publishers print copies to order, so treat with scepticism arguments about the cost of warehousing and storage. In any case, their production costs - unlike those of a conventional publisher - have already been met (by you). There is inevitably less of an incentive for the publisher to sell the work.

Check on the quality of production (often distinctly poor), and the financial credentials of the vanity publisher. You might want to see examples of other books produced by the firm, and a copy of their latest catalogue. And check the fine-print; for example, an undertaking to print 'up to' 1,000 copies actually guarantees nothing.

If conventional publishers have turned the work down, it is most probably on economic grounds and, although there are well-recorded stories of bestsellers collecting rejection slips, one has to accept that an experienced editor may have a better idea of what will sell than you do.

Be realistic about who will read your work

Reviewers and booksellers know the names of vanity firms. They also know that (even if this does not apply to your book) many works that were not good enough to find a conventional publisher end up on vanity lists. Occasionally a book produced by one of the better-respected vanity firms might be reviewed, but it is extremely rare.

Many people enter into vanity arrangements because they cannot find a conventional publisher and feel that what they have to say would be of real value to other people. But beyond the hurdle of the publisher's inertia, bear in mind that one cannot force a bookseller to stock a particular title, nor can one force a potential reader to buy it.

If you cannot find a conventional publisher, and you have the money to spend, then consider self-publishing before vanity publishing.

Online/Electronic Publishing

If your work is unpublished, be very cautious about agreeing to have it published first, or only, online or as an ebook/print-on-demand. This is an easy market for vanity publishers (the production, marketing and distribution costs of making ebooks and running off print-on-demand copies are very low). Even if you are not being asked for money, proceed with great caution.

Such companies often have little incentive to sell or promote your work (which may well only be listed on the publisher's website and in its catalogue), and may be earning their money in other ways, e.g. selling advertising on their website; or by buying up an author's other rights, so if a work takes off in future they are guaranteed a percentage of the earnings.

Be realistic about who your readers might be. How many people do you know who have sought out such websites? And of them, how many have thereby come across a book they had not heard of before, bought it and read it? If the site is just one of many offering a random selection of titles covering a miscellaneous range of subject areas (not always by top quality writers), ask yourself: is that really the best home for my work?

If you go ahead, limit the rights you are granting to ebook rights only; and make sure that you can terminate the contract after, say, two years. A better alternative might be to set up your own website and sell copies of the book (self-published in printed or electronic form) yourself.