



*An E-Book for Writers and Editors*

# *What Is Self-Publishing?*

*By Erin Brenner*

*Owner, Right Touch Editing*



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*Erin Brenner*

Steve Almond is the author of six traditionally published books, including *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life* and *Candy Freak*. In addition, Almond has self-published several books, including *This Won't Take But a Minute, Honey*, a collection of short essays on writing and flash fiction stories that demonstrate the writing lessons.

## *Why Self-Publish*

Why should you self-publish your book instead of going through a traditional publisher? There are many reasons. Almond self-publishes to make a personal connection with his readers. He reads from his books to audiences and loves the give-and-take of conversations with his audience about the books' topics and about reading in general. He seems to thrive on it, and he enjoys meeting his readers as he's selling the books.

Almond also self-publishes for creative control. No one can tell him no. In *This Won't Take But a Minute*, the essays are printed in one half of the book. Finish the essays, and you'll have to flip the book over to read the stories. The book sports two covers per book, and Almond has printed the books with three different sets of covers. He finds it interesting which covers readers choose.

Why print a book this way? Why not? With self-publishing, you can choose a concept without worrying that the publisher will nix it because of high costs or because it won't mix well with the publishers' other books or because it won't fit right on the shelf. As the author-publisher, you make your own choices and they don't have to fit into a publisher's formula for success.

There are other reasons to self-publish your books:

- ▶ You want to write the book you want to write
- ▶ Your book will only sell to a niche audience and a traditional publisher won't see profit from it
- ▶ You want to control the entire process for your book
- ▶ You're a glutton for punishment

## *Be Gluttonous*

Self-publishing is a lot of work. You're responsible for *everything* to do with your book: building an audience, writing, editing, designing, printing, transporting, marketing, selling, accounting, and so on.

On the other hand, you can control everything: building an audience, writing, editing, designing, printing, transporting, marketing, selling, accounting, and so on.

Whether you personally do each step in the process or hire out, you have final say about—and final responsibility for—everything. You’ll have to invest financially in your book before you make a dime.

As your own publisher, you’re going to have to pay for services for the book and then sell it. You may hire an editor or a designer. You’ll definitely hire a printer and maybe some PR help. None of these vendors will wait until the sales roll in to be paid—and it’s unprofessional to ask them to. So be prepared to put some money behind your book.

Don’t expect to make a ton of money self-publishing, either. Even if you sell your book through online bookstores and local bookstores, you don’t have the publisher’s marketing machine behind you. Yet you might not become rich from traditional publishing either. It takes time to become a Stephen King, and very few do. Many writers who have gone the traditional route have seen only small returns on their books for one reason or another. If you’re into writing for the money, switch careers.

There are DIY exceptions out there. It is possible to not only sell a lot of books but also get big traditional publishers interested in you. [Amanda Hocking](#) has sold over a million copies of her novels, which she calls “young adult paranormal romance and urban fantasy.” A million copies! It was enough to get the attention of [St. Martin’s Press](#).

Lisa Genova, author of *Still Alice*, is another exception. She had a very personal experience with Alzheimer’s and wanted to write about the disease from the patient’s point of view. Publisher after publisher turned her down, so she published the book herself. She did her own editing, had her husband design the cover, hired a print-on-demand printer, and marketed the heck out of her book, always having a copy with her. She believed in her project and went for broke.

It paid off. Ten months after *Still Alice* was first published, Genova found an agent, who sold the book to Pocket Books. She says that Barnes & Noble sold more copies in the first two days than she had in the first 10 months.

### *Before You Write the Book*

That’s right, there are steps to self-publishing (traditional publishing, too) before you even sit down to write your book. In traditional publishing, if you’re writing nonfiction, you’re going to put a pitch together for an agent or a publisher. This is to ensure that there’s an audience for your book and that you are writing for them. Once your book is contracted and you have a direction, you begin the writing process.

With fiction, you generally have a manuscript already when you approach agents and publishers, but you still may go through many revisions to streamline your story for a specific audience. An agent may suggest rewrites that turn your chick lit book into a YA novel because she has a publisher who would buy your story as a YA novel, for example.

If you're going to publish your book yourself, however, you don't have an agent or publisher guiding your writing to a predetermined audience. So before you write a word, decide who your audience is. Be as specific as you can. If you aim to write a diet book, who will read your advice: Women? Men? Twentysomethings? Fiftysomethings? How about [fiftysomething women who have tried all the diet advice](#) there is and just want to lose the last few pounds and be happy with their bodies?

Once you know who your audience is—and as you start writing—go find them. Get to know your audience and become a respected voice in their community. Interact with them. Tell them you're writing a book about your shared topic, if you want. More important, demonstrate that you know your topic.

Check out online and offline groups and organizations that focus on your topic. If you're writing a book about Alzheimer's, as Lisa Genova did, then getting involved in the Alzheimer's Association is a great way to build an audience who will be interested in your book. Write a blog and get it noticed. Speak on your topic at relevant events.

Your self-published book will sell mostly by word of mouth. There's no well-oiled marketing machine prepping the market until you create it. It takes time to create that marketing machine and to build an audience. When your book is finished, do you really want to spend months, even years, building that audience or do you want people eagerly awaiting its arrival? This built-in audience is just your starting point. You need to have sold them on your book already when you publish. They'll start evangelizing for you and help you sell your book. (More on that later.)

### *I Wrote a Book, Now What?*

When self-publishing your book, you can buy a package of services from a packager or you can hire all the vendors yourself. Or you can buy a smaller package of services and pay independent vendors for others. You're in charge; it's up to you.

If you opt to contract with a packager, remember that you get what you pay for. This is your book that you're investing in. Find out exactly what you're paying for. Does the publisher offer editing services, such as copyediting? An editorial review is **not** editing. This review only says that you've got a basic form of a book. It doesn't help you organize your book. It doesn't ensure that your grammar, usage, and spelling are sound. It doesn't apply a consistent style. It doesn't check your facts. It doesn't even look for typos.

Don't get me wrong: an editorial review is useful. But you also want your book to be *edited*. Everyone makes mistakes in writing, from a simple typo to larger problems of timelines and organization. You don't want your readers to find that your main character is a blue-eyed blonde on page 6 and a brown-eyed brunette on page 106. Or that you advise eating 10 oz. of vegetables a day in chapter 4 but 12 oz. of vegetables a day in chapter 16.

If the packager doesn't offer editing services, you'll need to hire (or barter for) these services. Even if the packager does offer editing services, you'd be wise to hire an independent editor. The

packagers don't make money on the quality of the book, so they hire editors for little money and expect a lot of work in a short time. As a result, the manuscripts get little more than a spelling check.

Other questions to consider:

- ▶ What kind of design services does the packager offer? Will you have to find someone to design your book cover or is that included in your package? Consider, too, the quality of the covers offered. Like it or not, readers *do* judge books by their covers.
- ▶ Do you have to buy a base number of books upfront? How many books are you comfortable trying to sell on your own over time?
- ▶ Will the packager get you listed on Amazon? Sell your book from its website?
- ▶ How long will the packager hold on to your files and reprint the book for a lower fee?

Do your homework. Know what you need, what the publisher offers, and what you need to do for yourself. This is where you put on your accountant's hat and determine the true cost of publishing your book. If you're looking for a lot of services and are willing to pay for them, this might be the way to go.

Hocking, Genova, and a few notable others are exceptions not the rule, and they worked hard to become those exceptions. If it sounds like I'm against self-publishing, I'm not. But to be successful, you have to define what success is for you. Know why you're self-publishing and what you hope to get out of it. Know what kind of work is ahead of you, and be prepared to not only take on all the work but also to financially back your project. Go in with your eyes open, and you're more likely to come out successful.

### *I'll Do It Myself!*

As with hiring a packager, you must remember that you get what you pay for. You'll need to vet and hire all the vendors for the jobs you can't do or don't want to do. This affords you a great deal of control over your final product, but it's also a lot of work (even more than buying a package of services) and has its share of risks.

Before you hire anyone, consider whether you want to use a contract or not. A contract protects both parties in a business agreement. If halfway through a project your editor deserts you, taking your hefty deposit with him, and you have no contract, you have very little chance of getting the promised work or your deposit back.

On the other hand, a handshake or an email is good enough for some people. If your spouse is designing your cover, there's a vested interested in seeing the work through. Especially if said spouse doesn't like sleeping on the couch.

I'm no lawyer, but I can say these are a few of the details to include in your contract:

- ▶ Expectations of the vendor

- ▶ Due dates
- ▶ Payments
- ▶ Costs
- ▶ Liability
- ▶ Contingencies if vendor doesn't come through

You can find examples on contracts all over the Net, but unless you have a good handle on your local laws, your best bet is to have a lawyer draft you a contract template.

Treat this as if you were hiring someone to care for loved ones. Review the candidate's resumé, ask to see samples (especially designers), and talk to past clients. Talk to the candidate and ensure he understands your project and you. Make sure you speak the same language—literally and figuratively.

### *Editing Services*

Once you have a completed manuscript, your next step is developmental editing or an editorial review. The developmental editor looks at your book from 5,000 feet. She reads through your manuscript with several questions in mind: Does your thesis make sense and do you follow through the whole book with it? Are your ideas fully flushed out and in a logical order? Are there holes in your topic that would help the reader understand what you're trying to say? If it's fiction, do you tell a complete story? Are your characters fully drawn and believable?

The developmental editor will make suggestions about improvements that will affect the whole of your book. She may suggest adding another chapter, tackling an important side topic, reordering your chapters, considering your character's motives, and the like.

Where can you find a developmental editor? Check out the following:

- ▶ Your network. A lot of freelance work is found by word of mouth. Ask people you know for recommendations, then do your homework (see above).
- ▶ [Bay Area Editors' Forum](#) (BAEF).
- ▶ [The Editorial Freelancers Association](#) (EFA).
- ▶ Advertising. If you haven't found the right development editor yet, before you do a Google search, try a free or inexpensive ad in one of these organizations that focus on editing:
  - [EFA](#). The EFA offers free listings.
  - [American Copy Editors Society](#) (ACES). Although ACES focuses on copyediting, many copyeditors also do developmental editing. Email ([jobs@copydesk.org](mailto:jobs@copydesk.org)) your free job description to have it posted to the job board.

- [Copyediting](#). You can peruse the resumes for free and pay for only those candidates you're interested in, or you can pay a little more to put up an ad (full disclosure: I'm the editor of the *Copyediting* newsletter).

When you're done with the developmental editing stage, substantive editing and/or copyediting comes next. Your developmental editor should be able to guide you on the extent of these next levels of editing you'll need.

In a nutshell, substantive (line) editing looks at the paragraph level of your book, while copyediting looks at sentences and even individual words. Your developmental editor may recommend someone, or you could search as you did before, using the list above. Either way, don't forget to do your homework.

### *Design and Production Services*

Once you're pleased with your text, you need someone to design a cover and format the book for publication. You could use one artist for both jobs or hire two different people. There are many resources for hiring designers and production artists, such as:

- ▶ Your network. Aren't you glad you started building a network before you started writing?
- ▶ MediaBistro. Search the [freelancer market](#) for free or pay to [place an ad](#). MediaBistro is also a great source of editing help, so you could take advantage of the multiple-posting discount.
- ▶ Packagers. This could be where you bring in the publisher to do specialized services for you.

If you're not totally broke yet, it's also a good idea to have your manuscript proofread at this stage. This editing pass looks for typos, formatting errors, grammar and punctuation mistakes, and other blunders that would be embarrassing in print. Check out the previously mentioned resources.

### *Let's Print!*

Your words sing, your cover is gorgeous, and you've got files ready to go. Now you're ready to print your book. You might use one of the packagers I mentioned earlier. Or check out the [Espresso Book Machine](#). This is total DIY print on demand. Go to one of the locations and input your files. In minutes your book is printing! Print as many or as few books as you want.

### *My Book's in Print! Now What?*

Take a moment to hold your book in your hand. It's a vision of loveliness, isn't it? Smell it. Ah, that new book smell! Feel the weight of it in your hand. Enjoy this moment. You've worked hard for it and you've accomplished a lot.

Done? Great, because now you have to sell the darn thing.

### *You've Got a Book, Tell the World!*

Remember back at the beginning, when you started building your network? It's time to make use of it. During your writing process, you should have talked about your topic so that others would start

to view you as an expert in your area. You were building respect and increasing your network. As you near the finish line of the self-publishing process, increase the interest in your book. When and where appropriate, talk about your it. Offer snippets from it.

If you're writing fiction or character-driven nonfiction, introduce your audience to one or more of your characters. Create an emotional bond between your character and your audience. Make it so that when your book comes out, your network will want to find out what happens to your character.

If you're writing other types of nonfiction, offer tips from the book or tell a bit of the story. Publish a blog post or article with the 10 best tips for doing something related to your topic. This can really drive interest; readers love tips that are easy to put into practice now.

How about a free download in exchange for an email address? Create a newsletter that keeps people up to date on your topic and the progress of your book. When you release the book, email all those people.

### *Start with the People You Know*

Now that the book is out, email your list. Offer a reduced price or another free download with the book to get sales started. Perhaps an autograph would interest your network. Wherever you've been talking about your topic, let them know your book is out and how they can purchase it. Make the book easy to purchase.

Look through your network. Who are some of the big influencers in your group? Who gets conversations started? Who do people listen to? Once you identify them, offer a free copy of your book and then stand back. Sure, you may get some negative comments, but if you've done your work as a writer and publisher, you'll get positive comments too. And the positive will have more validity if there are genuine negative comments mixed in. (Always be gracious about comments, positive and negative.)

Give copies of your book to family and friends as well. Encourage them to read it and talk about it, but, again, don't try to control the conversation. If you're selling your book online (and why wouldn't you?), ask people to post reviews on these sites, then link to them. Make it easy for people to click and buy.

### *Now Tell People You Don't Know*

Identify book reviewers who would be interested in your book and send them a copy, asking for a review. If they do review your book, good or bad, thank them. Keep track of the reviews, posting links to the good ones and quoting them on your website.

Contact your local media: newspapers, TV, and radio and let them know about your book. Offer to do interviews and offer copies for review.

Make a list of local bookstores, libraries, coffee shops, colleges, anywhere readings take place, and offer to do a reading. Remember those organizations focused on your topic? Offer to speak to them, as well.

This should go without saying, but every time you speak, have copies of your book with you—and change. Many of these sales will be cash, so be able to give correct change.

While you're at it, donate a couple copies of your book to local libraries. If it's appropriate, don't forget school libraries.

### *Sell It!*

Of course you will sell your book at your readings and out of the back of your car. But where else will you sell it?

If you've got an ISBN, you've got lots of choices.

Offline, ask your local bookstores to carry it. Don't forget the used bookstores; some of them sell new books as well. Even the big guys carry local books. Go in and talk to the manager and get your book in there. You're limited only by how far you're willing to drive (or ship) your books to a store.

Online, check out [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#) for a start.

Even without an ISBN, you can sell your book through sites like [Lulu.com](#) and even through your website or blog. PayPal is a wonder for taking online payments.

While you're doing all this selling, don't forget to stay authentic online. Keep creating original content or participating in discussions. Keep the momentum and goodwill going. Mention the book when it's relevant, but don't inundate people. It's like talking about your newborn or your pet: a little bit goes a long way, even for people who are interested.

### *Conclusion*

Self-publishing is not for the faint of heart. Just writing a book is a lot of work. Building an audience, publishing, marketing, and selling are even more work. But they can be worth it. You're taking all the risk, but you're also reaping all the reward. You have total control over the book, and you have a better chance of reaching an audience, especially if it's a niche audience, than the big publishing houses do.

Few authors sell a lot of books, even those traditionally published. If you're dreaming of fame and fortune, find another gig. Without a traditional publisher behind you, you'll sell books a lot more slowly. The houses have systems in place to move volume. Those who published themselves first and were later picked up by a publishing house will tell you that once they got a big house behind them, they sold more in two days on Borders.com than in two months on their own.

Going the DIY route means small sales, but you could get that with the traditional publishers as well. If you keep selling, you could build a small, steady income, one that can help fund your next book. That's really no different than what a publisher does, except that you're doing all the work and getting a bigger portion of profits.

Throughout the process, keep in mind why you're doing what you're doing. Keep your focus. Know the steps, and take them one at a time.



Find other helpful e-books at [righttouchediting.com/e-books-for-writers-and-editors](http://righttouchediting.com/e-books-for-writers-and-editors).



### *About the Author*



Erin Brenner, owner of [Right Touch Editing](http://Right Touch Editing), has been an editing professional for two decades, specializing in content marketing and website materials. Her clients includes SAP, ITSMA, and Collins Education Associates.

Erin shares her expertise through her work as editor of [Copyediting](#), as an instructor in UCSD's [copyediting certificate program](#), and as a speaker.

Contact Erin at [erin@righttouchediting.com](mailto:erin@righttouchediting.com) to help you with your next project.