

How to self-publish a book

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Posted by: By Tom Woods | October 12, 2016



I have plenty of experience in publishing. I'm the author of 12 books, including two *New York Times* bestsellers. The most recent of my 12 was self-published, and I was very pleased with the experience. I've also published five free eBooks.

I'm going to share with you what I've learned, and how you can use my experience to your advantage.

Most of what I say will have to do with eBooks, but I'll have some recommendations for print books as well.

First of all, understand that although self-publishing yields an author much higher royalty percentages, it also involves costs. You have to spend your own money on things a traditional publisher would take care of for you. The benefits are obvious – complete control over your product, and a much higher royalty rate – but we should remember that self-publishing has drawbacks, too. Yet, having released my first self-published book in 2014 after publishing 11 other books the traditional way, I am very much of the opinion that the benefits can outweigh the drawbacks.

Here's a bad reason to be skeptical of self-publishing: without the marketing muscle of a traditional publisher, authors fear, they will be on their own in getting the word out about their books.

Self-published authors certainly are on their own, it's true, and they need to be creative and energetic if they're going to promote their books. But the objection is based on a misconception: most publishers have little to no marketing arm worth speaking of, and of those that do, they expend their marketing resources very selectively. Most authors who write for a major publisher like Doubleday, for instance, are in effect left hanging out to dry. Doubleday focuses its energies on the small number of titles it expects to sell well, and everyone else is more or less in the same marketing position as the self-published author. I myself have been lucky: Random House and Regnery Publishing

pushed my books hard, and I'm really grateful. But that is the exception to the rule.

In other words, if you're worried that you'll miss out on the great marketing campaign that a traditional publisher would have given you, don't be. Publishers are very stingy about those.

When it comes to selling a digital product like an eBook, you have two main choices. You can go with Amazon, which is what I do, and produce a book for the Kindle. It will be sold in the Kindle store, and you'll have the advantage and the prestige of being easily found in the most recognizable book market in the world.

There are drawbacks to this approach, though to my mind not big enough to make me abandon Amazon. First, you'll keep only 70 percent of the revenue from each sale. This is not a problem, as far as I'm concerned, because the traditional author royalty for a physical book released by a mainstream publisher is a paltry 15 percent, and even that rate kicks in only after you've sold 10,000 copies. (More on traditional royalty rates below.) To have the Amazon name behind you, with its ease of use, excellent reputation, and longtime familiarity to nearly everyone online, is certainly worth a 30 percent cut. If you had told authors back in, say, 1995 that they would earn "only" a 70 percent royalty, they would have been dancing a jig.

Second, if you decide to sell your book through Amazon's Kindle Store, you won't have the option of giving away free copies. To give the book away to someone you will actually have to purchase a copy through the Kindle Store. When the recipient claims the book, you will receive your royalty. So you'll wind up paying, on net, 30 percent of the book's price to give a copy away.

Your other option is to sell your eBook directly, without going through Amazon, by using a service like gumroad.com. With gumroad.com you receive 95 percent of the purchase price, as opposed to the 70 percent you'd earn with Amazon. Also, you're perfectly at liberty to give copies away to select people.

I still prefer Amazon, though, because (1) it's so much more familiar to most people, (2) most potential buyers already have their payment information on file with Amazon, so ordering is fast and easy, and (3) justified or not, the availability of your product through a well-known and respected company like Amazon makes both you and your product seem more legitimate.

How to Do It

Here are the steps I followed.

I wanted both Kindle and print editions. I do a lot of public speaking, and I sell a pile of books after my speeches. Even though I knew I would be emphasizing the electronic version of this particular book in my promotional efforts, the print edition is great for public events, and to sell on Amazon to people who – like me, to be honest – just prefer the old-fashioned print book.

I did not use an editor. But in this case, don't do as I do. I've written a dozen books and many hundreds of articles. Although practically anyone can benefit from the services of an editor, it didn't make sense in my case. My book was a collection of previously published articles, to be pitched to my existing audience rather than marketed to the public at large. Editing services would have been a waste of money.

What I'm about to say I don't mean as an insult, but as a simple observation based on the years of experience I have as both a college professor (where I graded thousands of student papers) and a magazine editor: most people cannot write to save their lives. The worst writers are the ones who think they're great. They think good writing means using big words and composing long, convoluted sentences.

I can't know if you're a fantastic writer – but chances are, neither can you. One thing is for sure: you don't want to be like the American Idol contestant whose intimidated friends all tell him what a great singer he is, leaving him to discover the awful truth on national television. Check out the editorial services you'll find with a company like [Xlibris](https://xlibris.com)

and see if they might benefit you.

Your Print Book

Let's get print out of the way first. To my mind, the clear way to go is through Amazon's [CreateSpace](#) program. They could not make the process easier. Once I signed up, I received an email from someone at the program asking when I'd be available to chat on the phone to discuss my project. This had to be a form letter from a robot, I thought. It was a form letter, to be sure, but when I wrote back with a time, a real person wrote me a personalized reply. This was true throughout the entire process: [CreateSpace](#) was right there to help me every step of the way.

CreateSpace offers a variety of style choices for the font and layout of the interior of your book. If your book contains no charts, graphs, photographs, or anything other than ordinary text, you can order one of their basic packages for (as of this moment) \$199. Otherwise, you'll have to get a fancier package starting at \$349.

The Book Cover

As for a cover, CreateSpace can design one for you, or you can go to an outside designer. I took the latter approach. Don't skimp on your cover. Forget the old adage that we shouldn't judge a book by its cover. The fact is, people *do* judge books by their covers. And if yours looks like it was designed by the editor of the homeowners' association newsletter, it's going to hurt both your sales and your credibility.

If you're on a very tight budget, the world will not end if you use a designer at [Fiverr](#) for your cover. But if you can manage it, a more professional option is vastly preferable. [Damonza.com](#) is a good option: high-quality covers, but also unlimited changes (so you can get the cover just right, and not have to settle for something you don't like just because you ran out of change requests), and two different cover designs to choose from. They also don't make you pay for stock images. They can design covers for both print books and eBooks.

The eBook

For my eBook I used [Kindle Direct Publishing](#).

You'll need to follow their [guidelines](#) for formatting your book file in one of their "Supported Formats." I myself didn't feel like figuring it all out, so I posted a job on [Upwork](#), a freelance site, and within 24 hours someone had done it for me for next to nothing.

The Case of the Free eBook

There can be very good reasons to give an eBook away for free, and I'll discuss them in a moment. But the steps I follow in preparing a free eBook, as opposed to an eBook for sale, are different, and I want to lay them out for you here.

First, though, why *free*? How can anyone earn money on *free*? Like it or not, free is what makes the Internet go round. People have come to expect all kinds of content for free. *The true entrepreneur is the person who figures out how to prosper in the world of free.*

I'll give you four reasons I give away free eBooks.

1.) I believe in the ideas expressed in these books, and I want to see them gain a wider audience. In the case of the free eBook I released on how to create a blog or website even if you don't know anything about programming or web design, I thought it could do a lot of good for a lot of people. (You can get that book [here](#), though I think [our own guide to starting a blog or website](#) is even more thorough.)

2.) Some of these books contain affiliate links, which can earn me commissions if people click through and order

something. (Warning: *do not* insert Amazon affiliate links into any eBook of any kind. It is technically a violation of the Amazon Associates program's rules, and you do not want Amazon kicking you out of that program.)

3.) Some of these books incidentally promote some of my paid services.

4.) The books are a great premium to offer as an enticement to get signups to my email list. Email lists are important, for reasons we explain on some of our other resource pages here. They allow you to communicate with site visitors again and again – visitors who may otherwise have visited your site just once and then be lost to you forever. If you wind up producing products or services – including books! – for sale, you have a built-in audience of people who are interested enough in what you do that they shared their email addresses with you. That's valuable.

It's not easy to get people to give you their email addresses. They don't want to be overwhelmed with email. They get enough as it is. You'll need to offer them something to overcome any hesitation they have in sharing their email with yet another website. A free eBook is an excellent way to go.

(To learn exactly how to start, build, and effectively use an email list, check out our [guide to building an email list](#).)

Incidentally, you may wonder what to put in a free eBook. Here are two ways to make the process as easy as possible on yourself.

I myself host a weekday podcast. As one way of promoting the show, I give away free eBooks. I create these eBooks from transcripts of some of my episodes. I find transcripts with a theme in common, and I collect those transcripts into an eBook. (For the transcripts themselves, I hired relatively inexpensive transcriptionists via [Fiverr](#) and [Upwork](#).)

At the end of each transcript/chapter of these eBooks there's a link to subscribe to my podcast on iTunes and Stitcher, the two most popular podcast delivery systems. The appendices of these eBooks promote my subscription services. They also promote my most recent book. That book, in turn, promotes the show – one section of the book contains transcripts of some of my most interesting episodes. It's this kind of synergy, in which much of what you do involves cross-promotion of other things you do, that can get you serious traction online.

Chances are, you don't have a podcast and transcripts. But once you start your blog, and produce content for it regularly, before you know it you have more than enough material for an eBook. Each blog post can be a separate chapter. Easy.

Remember that eBooks – especially the free kind – can vary widely in length, and can be much shorter than traditional books. You're giving this book away, after all, so no one is in a position to complain that your book isn't longer.

I myself don't worry too much about the layout of a free eBook. I make it as attractive as I can, but I don't hire anyone to do fancy typesetting or anything like that. The book is free, after all. If people are complaining about the font, they are not worth your time.

As for a cover, remember: the book is free. Don't spend a fortune. I myself did a search for eBook cover design at Fiverr and found a whole bunch of designers who do quality work inexpensively. As of this printing, you can have a quite serviceable cover designed for five dollars, as I have.

For an extra five dollars, you can generally get a 3D version of your book cover, with your book standing at an angle and looking like a real book with a spine. I recommend buying this, too, because the 3D image, while not usable in your book itself, will look very sharp in your promotional material.

And that's it. Just upload the finished product to your site and you're done. You can then link to it so people can freely download it, or, as I recommend, make it available only to people who sign up for your email list. (Again, find

out how to do this, and the exact tools I've had such success with, in our [guide to building an email list](#).)

Before We Continue: The Terrible Truth About Book Sales

It would be dishonest and unethical of me not to include this section. I want my readers to believe they can trust me. So I'm about to tell you something that as a prospective author you will not want to hear.

Before I became an author myself, I – like most people – held an inflated estimate of the number of copies the typical book (bestselling or otherwise) sold. I also thought the author earned more per book than he really does. In my experience, the general public shares the misconceptions I once held.

Now for the terrible truth.

Books, says one of my publishers, are some of the hardest things in the world to sell. Nonfiction books are even worse, of course – next to no one, relatively speaking, reads nonfiction. It doesn't help that there were 195,000 distinct titles published in 2005 alone (the latest statistic of which I am aware). I happen to know of a major publisher all readers of this site have heard of, which (at the time I heard the statistic) had published 3000 different books in one year. How many of those 3000 titles sold more than 2000 copies? About 200.

Books are not at all easy to sell.

On top of that, an author with a trade publisher typically earns 15 percent of the cover price of a hardcover. Common contractual terms run as follows: 10 percent for the first 5000 copies, 12.5 percent for the next 5,000, and 15 percent for all copies thereafter. Paperback editions earn the author 7.5 percent of the hardcover price. That's before taxes, though one small consolation is that royalty income is not subject to self-employment tax (unless royalty income is a major, recurring part of your overall income, in which case your accountant will tell you to play it safe and pay the self-employment tax). It's also before any agency fees — your literary agent, if you have one, will typically earn 15 percent. Mine, who has helped me with several of my titles, earned every penny, but it's still a deduction from your income.

University and academic presses are typically less generous. Sometimes you are actually expected to prepare your own index, if you don't want to be docked to have one of their in-house people perform that service. I did the indexes for a couple of my early titles. It is an unspeakable task. Royalties, moreover, typically don't exceed 10 percent, and usually operate on a sliding scale beginning with 5 percent.

It's embarrassing to recall, but I remember thinking [The Church Confronts Modernity](#), my book with Columbia University Press, would sell around 10,000-20,000 copies! After all, I thought, at least that many people would be interested in the subject matter it deals with, so of course it'll sell that many. Ahem.

My most successful book, [The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History](#), has sold about 220,000 copies so far. That is a veritable miracle for an unknown author with little access to mass media. But it's well below what most people assume I have sold.

Not long ago, someone referred matter-of-factly to the “millions of copies” of [Meltdown](#) – my 2009 book on the financial crisis – I must have sold. Would that it were so. No one sells millions of copies of a nonfiction title, with exceedingly rare exceptions, such as people with television or radio talk shows (who can promote their books before a huge audience every day) and the occasional outlier with a clever or quirky idea that happens to attract a lot of media attention.

[Meltdown](#) sold about 70,000 copies. This is astonishingly low to most people, particularly given the ten weeks it spent on the *New York Times* bestseller list. But the publishing world, which knows the dreary nonfiction sales figures all too well, was envious of my publisher for having such a big hit during a depressed period for publishing.

Having done this for a number of years now, I've come to expect sales to be at about this level. It's extremely difficult to sell in excess of 50,000 copies of a nonfiction title, which I consider myself very fortunate to have done three times (my [book](#) on the Catholic Church and Western civilization being the third). But when you tell people the real figures, they are (understandably) stunned and disappointed. It's like telling a relative at a family cookout that you were just accepted at the University of Pennsylvania or the University of Chicago. Someone in the know realizes you've just reached a great milestone. Many average people, on the other hand, figure you just got accepted at a run-of-the-mill school.

Even though nonfiction titles sell fewer copies than you may have thought, they are not for that reason a waste of time, particularly if you derive intellectual pleasure, as I do, from the challenge that comes with writing them. Writing a book can open major print, radio, and television outlets to you and your ideas, thereby giving you a chance to spread your message to a wider audience than just the reading public. Authors receive speaking invitations that give them the opportunity to reach a broader audience still, while adding to their (erratic) income. And so on.

If you want to write a book, then, just be sure to go into it with your eyes open: you probably won't retire on the royalties.

But there are other reasons to write a book, even financial ones. A book can yield income indirectly. For one thing, rightly or wrongly, being an author gives you automatic credibility with lots of people. As I noted above, a book can open doors for you on the speaking circuit and in the media. It can promote your business, service, or product, though you need to be subtle about this.

Don't Forget Audiobooks

Here's still further advice: record an audiobook version if you have the voice for it and can read smoothly and without stumbling.

Here's why. There are three ways you can earn money with an audiobook when you submit it through [ACX](#), the Amazon company that deals in audiobooks.

(1) The first and most obvious is, of course, via royalties. The royalty schedule with Audible is a bit obscure, but the royalty payment can be as high as 40% of the list price – which, again by traditional publishing standards, is quite high.

(2) Second, Audible has an affiliate program you can use on your website. Of course, you can become an Audible affiliate even if you haven't narrated your own audiobook, but the program will bring in much more revenue for you if you can pitch your own book, narrated by you (readers love to hear authors read their own books), through their program.

It works like this. Audible.com gives away a free audiobook for people who sign up for a free 30-day trial of their site. If they cancel before the 30 days are up, they can still keep the free audiobook. If they continue with their subscription, depending on their subscription level they are entitled to one or more audiobooks per month, for a monthly fee.

When you sign up for [Audible's affiliate program](#), you are assigned a special link you can use to promote Audible. When you then say, hey, everyone, get my audiobook, read by me, for free with your 30-day trial at Audible.com, your readers will be clicking on a link that identifies you as the source of that click. If a reader goes on to sign up for the free audiobook, you get five dollars – even if the person winds up canceling and never buying anything from Audible, and even if it wasn't even your book the person wound up choosing as the freebie. Audible is paying you for leads. They're willing to roll the dice that enough people will become paying customers to make it worthwhile to pay you five dollars for everyone who signs up for a free trial. If the person goes on to continue with a paid Audible membership, you earn ten dollars.

There's an even more generous [program for podcasters](#): get fifteen dollars every time someone downloads the initial free audiobook, whether or not that person ever becomes a paid member of Audible.

(3) Still another way to earn money via your audiobook is the little-known ACX bounty program. If your book is the first title an Audible customer *pays for* (as opposed to getting for free), ACX will pay you \$50. It's not easy to promote this to your readers ("Make sure my book is the first one you pay for as an Audible subscriber" is pretty awkward), so treat it as bonus money that will bring a smile to your face when you happen to earn it.

Of course, you'll want to read the ACX guidelines for preparing audiobooks. Once I finished recording the audiobook version of *Real Dissent*, my 2014 book, I decided that rather than try to figure out all the technical ins and outs of preparing an audiobook for submission to ACX, I'd pay a visit to trusty old [Upwork](#) and have an expert just do it for me. I have a freelancer from Greece who does a lot of my audio work, and it turns out he has prepared many audiobooks to meet the ACX specifications. I had it back within 24 hours, all ready to go.

Marketing Your Book

Here's the tricky part. With hundreds of thousands of new books published every year, how are you going to get attention for yours?

There are many answers to this question. One involves services like [Xlibris](#), which I mentioned earlier. These are one-stop, done-for-you services that do it all in one convenient package: editing, formatting, cover design, publishing, distribution, and marketing. A lot of people prefer to go this route instead of the one I followed, because everything they need can be done under one virtual roof. This is a perfectly good option as well.

A company like iUniverse, for example, offers advertising, author and book videos, email campaigns, publicity services of various kinds, and much more.

Also, you want your books Amazon page to have reviews right away. Every publisher in the world will tell you to have five friends read the book in advance and have reviews ready to go as soon as your Amazon page goes live. A page with no reviews makes a lot of buyers hesitate, especially when they're considering a book by an unknown author.

Seth Godin recommends giving your first eBook away for free "and send it to your twenty closest friends. And, if that's the end of it, then you're not a good writer. On the other hand, if those twenty people send it to twenty more people, then you have four hundred readers, and then eight thousand readers, and so on. If you can get up to twenty thousand readers of your first book for free, there will be a line out the door of people wanting to help you with your next book." Of course, you'll want to sign up for an email service like [Aweber](#), so that when people sign up to get your free eBook, you can gather their email addresses and be able to contact them the next time you're releasing a product.

If you can't bring yourself to give your book away for free, consider selling it on Amazon for a very low price, like \$0.99. Since people haven't heard of you before, it's going to be hard to persuade them to part with \$10 or \$20 for your book. But although \$0.99 may not earn you much money, it could earn you an audience, and that certainly can't hurt.

If you enroll in [KDP Select](#), you have a couple of interesting options. First, for up to five days during every 90-day period, you can make your Kindle book available for free to Amazon Prime members. This can help generate buzz and reviews for your book. When people download your book from Amazon for free, Amazon counts it as a sale – which means your Amazon sales rank will go up, and your book will seem more legitimate to potential buyers. (Your sales rank goes up accordingly only after the free promotion comes to an end.)

The other option is to run a discount on your book at Amazon for a limited time. You choose the amount of time, though it can't be longer than seven days. Amazon even supplies a countdown clock next to your book, to give buyers a sense of urgency.

[Nick Loper](#) has produced a worthwhile online course that takes people through all the essential steps for getting your book noticed and really making something out of it. He covers everything from editing, formatting, choosing a title, choosing your categories, deciding on a price, having a successful launch, using social media, and much more. Again, you probably won't get rich – although you might! – but you'll get everything you can out of publishing a book.

[Author Marketing Club](#) has free online training and resources that authors can use to market their books successfully. That's probably my top recommendation. It has a premium membership if you're really serious, but the free membership has plenty of helpful resources, too. They also have a free eBook you'll want to read: [How to Sell More Books with Awesome Amazon Descriptions](#).

Publish that book, and best of luck!

Some of the links on this site are affiliate links, which means I earn a commission if you click on them and buy something. This helps me keep the lights on around here. Naturally, I don't recommend a product unless I have used and benefited from it myself, or I have researched it enough to determine it to be of good quality and likely to benefit my readers. I don't promote anything created by the swamp dwellers. Thanks for reading!