

# Working with Agents & Publishers

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You've written your book. You've redrafted it once, twice, probably more. You've polished it; maybe you've worked with an editor to get it in the best shape it can possibly be in. Now you're ready to put it out there into the big wide world. But how?

If you're at this stage the chances are you've already done some online research and the chances are you're even more confused! Do you need an agent? Should you self-publish? What on earth is a hybrid publisher? In many ways it has never been easier to get published - and in many ways the reverse is true. There are a number of options available to you and you need to work out which is the best one for you – this guide will help.

**Traditional publishing.** In a true traditional publishing model the author will be almost always be represented by an agent, the agent will submit their work to a number of publishers, one or more of those publishers will express an interest in the work and a deal will be done to purchase an exclusive license to publish it, ideally (for the publisher) worldwide, in all languages. Of course there are variations on that route to the publisher – some authors secure a deal without an agent, simply by approaching publishers direct. Most of the larger publishing houses discourage or actively forbid unsolicited approaches while some of the smaller houses are more open. However, whichever way a traditional deal is secured the outcome is that the publisher bears all the costs associated with publishing the book. The publisher will manage all the processes associated with preparing the book for publication and although you will be kept up to date with and involved in the process, the final decision on things like the cover, is the publishers.

**Self-Publishing.** When an author self-publishes the above is pretty much reversed. The author won't have an agent, will be responsible for all costs and will retain all rights. He or she will also have full control over the process – which also means they have full responsibility for the editing, cover design, typesetting, proofreading and the marketing, sales and distribution of their book.

**Hybrid publishing.** As its name would suggest, hybrid publishing is a mix of the two. The exact mix varies but essentially a hybrid tends to operate more as a traditional publisher in that they are selective in the books that they take on, have a rigorous editorial policy and have the back-end infrastructure of a traditional house including global sales and distribution and rights management. However, the author pays for the production of their book. This model should give the author the best chance of earning back their investment in their book as well as providing a strong platform from which to develop their career as a writer.

As you would expect there are pros and cons to each option. What you may not expect is that there is no clear winner when it comes to the best option – it really does depend on you, your book and your expectations. There is a table attached to the end of this document which summarises each option and the type of author it is best suited to.

### **Traditional publishing**

It's notoriously hard to get a traditional publishing deal. You may need to secure an agent before your book can be submitted to publishers and this is a hard nut to crack as well. You not only need a brilliantly written, highly commercial manuscript, you need a submission that will attract attention – in a good way – as soon as your email is opened (most agents will require online submissions but check the requirements that they have listed on their website). Perfecting your submission is an art in itself so do refer to the cribsheet I've included below. [see also [Preparing Your Work for Submission to Agents and Publishers](#)]

Be aware that the agent/publisher route takes a long time. Prepare yourself for the fact that if you do secure a traditional deal it is likely to be an absolute minimum of 18 months before your book hits the shelves (reasons include sell-in time, the publishing slots that are available and the appropriateness of those slots in terms of timing).

For some authors the loss of control can be an issue. This was probably less of a complaint a few years ago but traditionally published authors are now peeking over at what self-publishing can offer and questioning whether they like all the decisions being made for them or if they would rather have a little more control.

Some authors, and I stress only some, find the traditional route a little disappointing. There is no doubt it can be a rollercoaster ride with the (slight) possibility of huge success at one end of the scale and the (slightly greater) possibility of something less than huge success at the other. With realistic expectations it may be that self-publishing is a better route for you.

If you don't mind paying.

### **Self-publishing**

When an author self-publishes their book, all the costs are down to them. The editing, the cover design, the proofreading and typesetting/formatting, all need to happen whether the book is being published in print form or ebook only. Then there is the cost of printing the books and converting and distributing the ebook.

These costs can vary but as with everything, you get what you pay for. The Society for Editors and Proofreaders' [website](#) is enormously useful, providing a searchable database of freelance editors and proofreaders (as you might expect!) and also giving industry standard hourly rates. Cover design really is a moveable feast but you only have to look at the huge variation

in quality of self-published book covers to see that very careful consideration must be given when looking for a cover designer.

Print costs will vary depending on the book specification (size, content, paper quality, length etc.) and of course it is now possible to publish your book on a print on demand basis, meaning that a copy of the book is only printed when an order has been received. There should be little or no up-front cost in setting up a book on a POD basis as the printing costs are deducted at source – i.e. taken out from what the customer has paid for the book, so the author receives what's left after that and postage costs have been taken out. They'll also pay a small commission to the POD supplier.

Ebook conversion and distribution costs vary too and again which one is best for you depends on what kind of person you are. Essentially you can do it yourself or pay a service to do it for you and I would recommend this unless you are particularly keen to format and upload to the various ebook platforms (platform in this context refers to the retailer (or retailer device): Amazon and Apple are the best known but there are others including Kobo and Nook).

So cost is a major factor in self-publishing and could be regarded as the biggest 'con' in the list of pros and cons of each. However, the flip side of course is that once the author has covered these costs, all profits from sales of the book are theirs.

Another perceived disadvantage of self-publishing is that not only do you cover all the costs yourself but you have to do all the work too. It's true – you need to be author, publisher, marketer, publicist and salesperson. You also need to be your own accountant if sales are significant, so the term author-entrepreneur is really very appropriate.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Ongoing marketing, even at the lower, more manageable levels that most authors can realistically achieve helps to increase the likelihood of the long tail sales that we hope to see. Not only that but the best sales person for your book is most probably you. No-one will know it better or love it more – certainly to start with – and that knowledge and enthusiasm is invaluable.

A final con is the term 'self-publishing' itself. No matter how many success stories we read, or how many high-quality self-published books are out there, the stigma remains – particularly within the industry itself. While readers may not care a jot who has published the book they are reading, the industry certainly seems to. At the time of writing it is almost unheard of to find a self-published book reviewed in the broadsheets and book prizes are rarely open to both self-published and traditionally published books. There are of course many other ways to get your book noticed but this illogical judgement of a book's quality based on who funded its production is a personal niggle of mine.

In reality though, the success stories are incredibly few and far between and the truly well-published books are far outstripped by the poorly published ones, which is why this attitude to self-published books remains. The best way to ensure that self-publishing takes a respected and deserved place in the mainstream is by ensuring that authors pay the same attention to self-publishing their work as a traditional publisher would and this is where a good self-publishing service can really help.

### Hybrid

Although a hybrid publishing model does in theory give you the best of both worlds, in reality there are of course cons to consider too. There is the cost – likely to be considerably more than in a self-publishing set-up due to the selective and highly collaborative publishing process. A hybrid publisher is likely to be a smallish press – at the time of writing very few hybrids exist and none within big houses.

### What next?

So these are some of the pros and cons of the various routes but of course a traditional deal may not even be an option. The vast majority of books will not get a traditional deal. There are many reasons that a book may not quite make the grade for a traditional publisher to invest in it and this could be anything from not fitting neatly into a specific genre, being too similar to something else out there, too much competition in the case of a non-fiction title or simply not good enough. Sorry.

None of these reasons, even the latter mean that the book should not be published. If a book is deemed not good enough for commercial publication it does not mean that its author should be denied the pleasure of seeing their hard work in print. However, every author needs to be very realistic in pursuing their publishing journey. And remember, even publishing a few copies just for friends and family can be fun – especially if you have a party to celebrate!

Ultimately, your job as the author is to understand the pros and cons of the various publishing options, be realistic about where you and your book fit within those models and whatever you decide – go for it!

Type of publishing	Pros	Cons	Best for
Traditional	A good publishing deal from a big house is still the preferred route for most authors. You'll receive an advance, the might of a big machine behind you	It's possible to get lost in the machine and if you're not a lead author you can feel overlooked.	Career writers.

	and the credibility that comes with it.		
Hybrid	Collaborative, supported publishing that provides the infrastructure of a traditional house but that generally allows far more author involvement than the traditional option.	Requires the cost of publishing to be covered by the author, which can represent a significant investment.	Debut authors looking to springboard to a traditional deal. Established authors who have an existing readership.
Self-publishing	Full control over the process. The ability to manage everything yourself or work with a self-publishing service where you can opt in or out depending on what you need.	Requires the cost of publishing to be covered by the author. This should be less than in the hybrid option. Most services will not have traditional sales and rights departments	Any author wishing to get their words into print as this option can work at many levels depending on what you need.

#### Agent/Publisher submission crib sheet

There are a few simple things you can do to ensure your submission doesn't end up straight in the email bin. Follow the guidelines below to give yourself the best possible chance.

Identify the agents and/or publishers that would be right for your book (do your research)	This is the first and most important thing to do. Search for agents and publishers who represent and publish YOUR KIND OF BOOK. <u>Don't</u> send your gritty crime thriller to an agent that represents children's books. <u>Don't</u> send your poetry collection to a publisher that doesn't publish poetry. It sounds simple but you would be amazed at the number of submissions we receive at RedDoor that simply don't fit with what we publish.
Address your submission accurately (do your research)	A personal email is far better than a general one. It's very easy to find the name of the person you want to submit to and it creates a far better impression than 'to whom it may concern', 'dear editor', or the worst of all for us 'Dear Sirs' – we're an all female team.
Send in what they want (do your research)	All agents and publishers will list their submission requirements on their website. Most commonly they will require a synopsis and the first three chapters. Sometimes they will ask for the first 10,000 words, or 50 pages and usually they will want the submission via email. Try to follow their instructions to the letter but use your judgement – if your book has no chapter breaks, then send the first 10,000 words and explain why in your covering email.

Have an attention-grabbing elevator pitch.	Being able to encapsulate your book in just a few words is hard but it's worth the effort. Even a small agent or publisher will be receiving around 100 submissions a month and bigger ones many more. A line that tells them that your book is ' <i>Apple Tree Yard</i> meets <i>Girl on the Train</i> ,' or 'A new take on managing change that turns <i>Who Moved my Cheese</i> on its head' will position your book in their mind instantly and hopefully encourage them to read on.
Think about your covering email/letter	In most cases you will be writing an email but treat it the same as you would a letter. General emails that you send every day might be relaxed and chatty in style but your submission email is your first and probably only chance to create a good impression. Make it friendly and informative. Use your elevator pitch and tell them why you think your book is a good fit for their list. Tell them a little about the book and then tell them a bit about you, the shortlists you've made, courses you've been on, short stories you've had published and so on. Advice on the perfect cover letter varies – this is just what works for us at RedDoor.
Check it and check again	Proofreading isn't just what happens later in the publishing process. Make sure you check your cover letter, synopsis and sample material. It's not a deal-breaker to have an error in the first few pages but we do find it a bit off-putting.
Follow up	Most agents and publishers will quote a turnaround time of at least three months so be prepared to wait a while. A friendly check in once that time is up is sensible. No need to check your emails have been received. It's rare that they go astray.
Don't expect feedback	We know it is frustrating to receive rejections with little or no feedback but it really isn't the agent or publisher being lazy. The sheer number of submissions makes it very difficult to respond to everything with considered feedback.
Do keep trying	Books are very subjective. Even if you have got your targeting right and you are submitting to all the agents within your genre they will all have slightly different takes on your book. Keep trying!
But know when to stop	If you don't have any luck there will be a point when you feel that you have exhausted all options or you may simply begin to feel that this route is not for you. If this is the case don't be afraid to look at other ways to publish your book. Hopefully the above document will have given you a little insight into what each one entails. Good Luck!

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