

# How-to For Authors



ALLi (The Alliance of Independent Authors) is the nonprofit professional association for authors who self-publish and want to do it well.

Our motto is "**Working together to help each other**"

## How to Choose a Self-Publishing Service

ALLI #1

As soon as an author starts to consider self-publishing, questions begin to arise. Some are fear-based questions like: What will others think? Will I have the same status as a "properly" published writer? These we can ignore, as we must ignore all self-doubt that interferes with creative output and flow. But valid, work-centered, creative questions also arise:

*"Do I have what it takes to go it alone and publish well?"*

*"What services and supports do I need?"*

*"What kind of provider is best for me as an author and the book I want to publish?"*

*"How much will it cost me?"*

*"How much can I make? Do I want to make a living at this?"*

*"Who offers the best services for me and this particular project?"*

It's not easy. An industry has sprung up around self-publishing and it's growing at great speed, with trade publishers who traditionally invested in authors now getting charging for services.

To become a self-publisher is to step from one work sector into another. Writing is self-expression; publishing is business, for self-publishers as much as everyone else. And while writing requires solitude, business requires connection and collaboration. It takes us away from our own imagination back into the stream of life.

**"Self"-publishing** is really a misnomer. Nobody who publishes a good book does it alone.

We all need editors and good promotional plans, at a minimum, if we are to do this job well. Many others need assistance with design and production issues and publicity. This is why author services are now in big demand.

When demand for any service is high, scammers and schemers circle. The publication-for-payment industry has a long history of schemes and scams, and new ones are now mushrooming all over the place, taking advantage of self-publishing's growing kudos. These may be fired by technology but they are indistinguishable from the vanity services of old.

Acid test: Their business model is not selling books to readers but selling largely ineffectual services to uninformed authors.

Victoria Strauss of *Writer Beware*, and a contributor to ALLi's watchdog desk, has tracked the amazing growth of these schemes and scams for years.

"Self-publishers face a wide array of dangers," she says.

From "editing services" that do little more than run manuscripts through spelling and grammar checks, to overpriced designers, artists, and formatting services, to bogus publicists who charge a premium for junk-mail "marketing," to predatory self-publishing services that advertise themselves misleadingly and engage in relentless upselling.

This is an unregulated market: on one hand creative, innovative, and exciting; on the other, idiosyncratic, illogical, and incoherent.

Some services are run by people who are knowledgeable, dedicated, helpful and fair. Others are clueless, greedy, callous, and manipulative.

Authors must make their publishing choices in an unregulated environment where the same service can cost \$500 or \$15,000, depending on where you shop.

Where services gloss over the challenges of writing and publishing well and overstate the value of ineffective services, particularly around marketing and promotion. And where one large operation with many imprints dominates the information stream, including Google Ads/search: Author Solutions, owned by Penguin-Random House.

It's not surprising that so many tyro self-publishers fall victim to literary fraud, scams, and misleading practices, duped by the pretense that their book is being "published," while in reality it is only being printed or formatted.



"Lack of competence is also a big problem," says Victoria.



"There are skilled providers for every step of the self-publishing process, but there are also many people offering services—often for a lot of money—that they aren't qualified to deliver.

These people may not be scammers; in fact, they may have the best of intentions. But goodwill is not a substitute for experience. For most writers, the difference between a scammer and an amateur is negligible: either way, they wind up with a smaller bank account and an inferior product."

### **How, then, to make your way in this complicated, confusing new realm?**

Starting out, many writers type "Self-Publishing" into Google search and instantly find themselves overwhelmed by choices or bogged down in jargon, completely confused about who does what, and for how much.

The answers to their questions are in there somewhere but framed in different ways, using different words, terms and jargon, by different people.

Instead of clarity, the writer emerges with a whole new suite of questions:

*"How much should an editor cost?"*  
*"How do I protect my copyright?"*  
*"Is it worth paying for promotion?"*  
*"What is an ISBN? Do I need one?*  
*How do I get one?"*  
*"Who should I choose to help me?"*

The answer to that question, at the very beginning, is: no one. Not until you understand the mechanics of publishing.

## What is Self-Publishing?



**The printing of pbooks and formatting of ebooks is *production*, not publishing.**

Production is just one of six stages in the process of publication, which literally means, “to make known.” Those six stages (after writing of course, the first and last stage, the alpha and omega of it all) are:

1. Editing: content, copy/line editing, proofreading;
2. Design: ebook and cover design, interior design;
3. Production: manuscript conversion, ebook and print layout/formatting, audiobook production;
4. Distribution: getting the book out to vendors;
5. Promotion: letting people know the book exists and why they should buy it;
6. Rights Licensing: trading the right to translate your book, or turn it into a film or TV program or other subsidiary rights.

One of the jobs we do daily at [The Alliance of Independent Authors](http://TheAllianceofIndependentAuthors.org) (ALLi) is guide our members through what Victoria has described as “shark-infested waters.”

Our aim is to help our members, and the wider indie-author community, self-publish with ethics and excellence. (And, one point to note: excellent publishing means selling books).

Much of our work is education—teaching indie authors how to think and act like a publisher. To develop an indie mindset is, first and foremost, to take control.

To see ourselves as the creative director of our books from concept to completion—which means all the way through to reaching readers. With the freedom afforded to us by technology comes responsibility.

*“Some writers want to self-publish without thinking or acting like a publisher in any way,”* says ALLi’s legal adviser, Helen Sedwick. *“They hand off their manuscript to a company like AuthorHouse, iUniverse, or WestBow Press without doing their homework, failing to research the company’s reputation until they realize they’ve made a mistake.”*

*They buy a template cover, then discover five other books that look just like theirs. They don’t understand a contract, but sign it anyway, assuming it can’t be questioned. They are talked into buying videos, blog tours, and banner ads without considering whether they will increase sales enough to justify the cost. And then, disappointed and poorer, these writers give up the dream of getting their books into readers’ hands.*

***I want to say to these writers: Come on!”***

Self-publishing success requires you to take charge of the process and to maintain knowledge and control. To think and act like a business investor, an entrepreneur, the boss.

This guide gives you the skills and information you need to do this.



*"If you are planning on successfully self-publishing, comparison-shopping is essential," says Strauss. "There are scores of self-publishing services, offering a range of prices—from free to five figures—and features. Only by comparing one to another and getting to know what's possible can you be sure to find the best match for your needs and goals."*

**Be Educated.** A good knowledge base is your best defense against schemes and scams. Take the time to learn about self-publishing before jumping into it. Sign up for our [Self-Publishing Advice blog](#).

**Be Social.** Hang out with other self-publishers—you'll learn a lot from both their successes and their mistakes. *ALLi's* member forum is invaluable and the active *Kindle Boards* are a treasure trove of information.

**Be Smart.** For any person or service you're thinking of hiring, check references, credentials, and reputations. Don't take anything at face value. If you have a question, do please ask our Watchdog desk by submitting an email through our contact form.

**Admit Your Mistakes.** If you signed on with the wrong company or freelancer, admit it and find a way out, even if it costs you money. *"Everyone makes mistakes,"* says Helen Sedwick. *"I've paid for cover designs I never used, and I wish I could get back money I paid for worthless promotions. Sometimes you just need to pay the piper and move on."*

## DIY or Assisted?

If you can afford it, you may be thinking about paying a company for a one-stop-shopping package covering editorial, design, production and marketing. This generally more expensive option may, depending on the contract offered by your service, limit your options.

The alternative is to take a more independent route and employ your own editors, designers, and, perhaps, publicist.

The most successful indie authors tend to take this second option—picking and choosing single service providers, to maximize creative and financial freedom and control.

This is hands-on book preparation and design, learning by doing.

It requires you to draw together online tools and collaborators and combine them with your own competencies and self-taught skills and, first time out, will take you on a steep learning curve.

This is why some people like to break themselves in gently by starting with a supported service. And others value the support on an ongoing basis.

*"I'm with Adam Smith on division of labour,"* says historical novelist, Alison Morton. *"I did not want to spend my time learning a whole new skillset which may or may not be up to the highest possible industry standards when others, professionals, could do it for me. I gain time to write. Whether you go DIY, buy in services on an "as and when" basis or buy a full-service package, the choice really is yours. **And isn't that what independent publishing is all about?"***



## YOU ARE THE PUBLISHER

If you hire any of the companies in this guide, or anyone else to help you self-publish, remember: they are your service provider, not your publisher. You are the publisher.

- **You should not allow anyone else to decide your book's retail price, size, design, cover image or title and in deciding your book's price, you should have thought about why.**
- **You should not give them exclusive rights to your book.**
- **If you are using an exclusivity program, (e.g. Amazon's KDP Select program), check out what you are losing in exchange for any exclusive benefits.**
- **You should give anyone an option on your next book unless they have already invested serious money in your career and have a plan for that book.**
- **You should not sign anything you don't understand.**
- **You should educate yourself. Read until you understand everything regarding the granting of rights, licenses, and ownership.**
- **You should ensure that any contract you sign can be terminated by you at any time.**

ALLi publishes:

### **HOW TO CHOOSE A SELF- PUBLISHING SERVICE**

The only annually updated guide to the global self-publishing services industry



**[The 2018 edition is now available here](#)  
(Free to ALLi Members)**

### **Other Resources:**

- [David Gaughran](#)
- [The Independent Publishing Magazine](#)
- [Kindle Boards \(aka Kboards\)](#)
- [Preditors & Editors](#)
- [Writer Beware!](#)



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