

Down the Indie Road

Indie Publishing for Beginners

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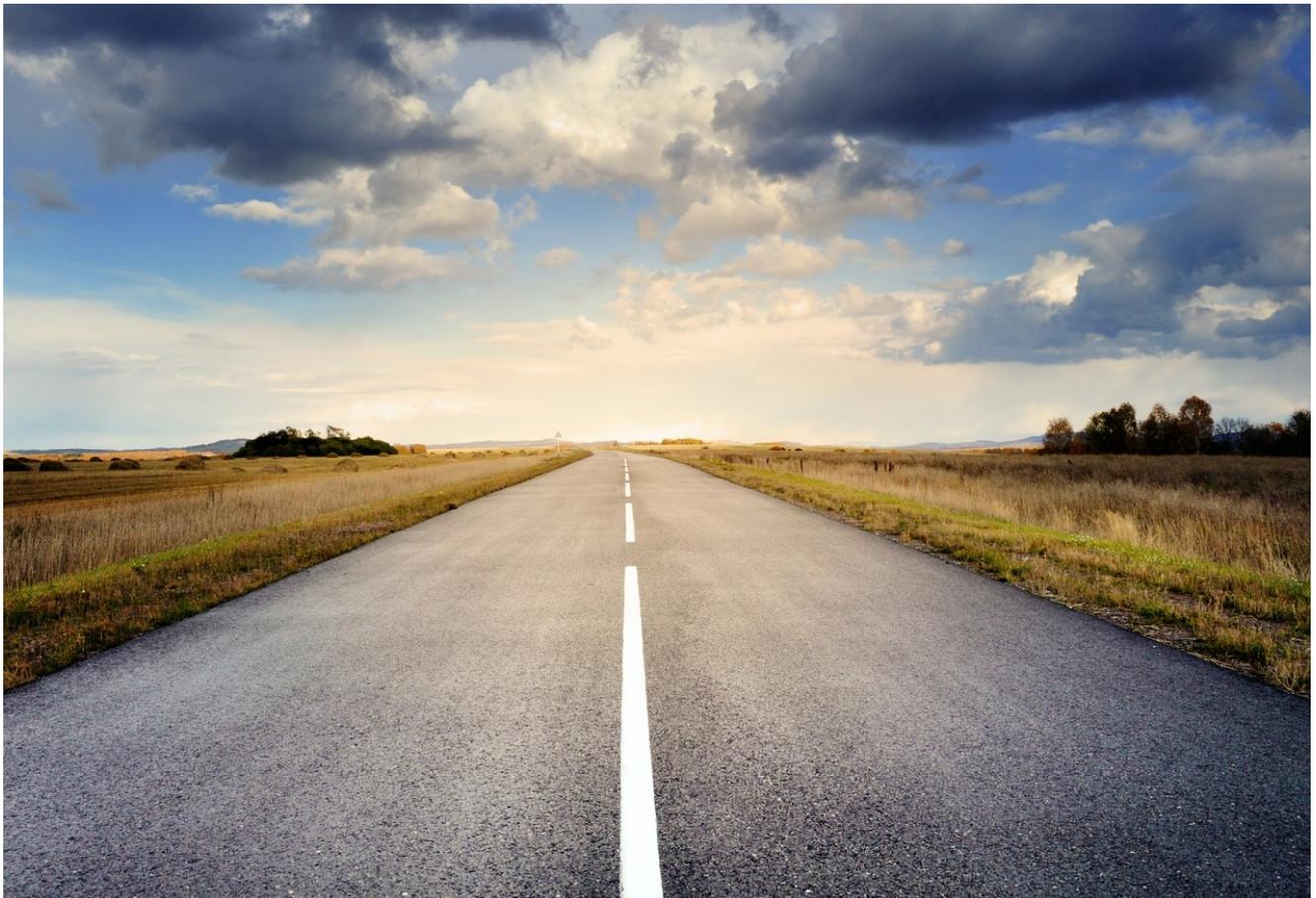


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Introduction

This indie publishing guide is for beginners and people who are just considering dipping their toes in the world of indie publishing. It outlines some of the advantages and disadvantages of indie publishing and some of the key considerations, steps, potential costs, and potential incomes associated with moving forward.

This is intended as a quick overview guide to get you started and does not go into detail regarding some of the nitty-gritty aspects of indie publishing, such as filling out your tax forms, marketing your book, using the various publishing platforms, and other essential aspects of indie publishing. Many of those topics are covered in more detail on my blog (www.jenniferellis.ca) and I will provide the relevant links in the text. Additional references are also included where helpful.

In addition, I provide links at the end of this guide to other key overview guides that I found useful when starting down the indie road. As time goes on, I will add to this guide and post updates on my website—so stay tuned.

My Journey

I started down the indie road in 2013 when—after getting an agent and having my novel kindly rejected by the big three publishers here in Canada—my agent indicated he was out of ideas and I should just write another book. However, I was not prepared to give up on my novel, *In the Shadows of the Mosquito Constellation*. I decided that perhaps I could do better finding an audience for it myself. Two years, five novels, three short-story anthologies, and one box set later, I have learned a lot about the indie publishing industry. This is the compilation of some of what I've learned along the way. I'm big on keeping things real, so this will take a hard look at some of the up- and downsides of indie publishing, including your chances of success and some of the things you should do to improve your odds of success.

Two years, five novels, three short-story anthologies, and one box set later, I have learned a lot about the indie publishing industry.

Key Definitions

Below are some key definitions. You probably already know them, but just in case...

Indie Publishing

Indie publishing, once known as self-publishing, is where the writer is also the publisher and pays the upfront book editing, cover design, formatting, and marketing costs for his or her book in exchange for a higher royalty share (between 35 and 70 percent depending on the publishing platform and the price of the book), maintaining full rights to his or her work, and more control over their product and production schedule. The writer is fully in control of his or her work and publishing.

Note that some people use the term indie publishing to refer to publication by a small “indie” press. In Canada, there are many small presses. All of these books are looked upon in Canada as being traditionally published, since they follow the traditional publishing model of the publisher paying the costs and taking a large share of the royalties. As a result, I do not use the term indie publishing in this guide to refer to these types of books, but you should be aware that some people use the term for that purpose.

Traditional Publishing

Traditional publishing refers to a publishing arrangement whereby a small or large press publisher accepts your book for publication and, in turn, pays the costs of book editing, cover design, formatting, and marketing in exchange for a significant share of the royalties. Generally speaking, the writer receives between 8 and 10 percent of the royalties and relinquishes most of the rights to their work. The publisher in general will be the one that makes the final calls regarding editing, design, marketing, and the publishing schedule (often with little input from the writer).

Hybrid Publishing

Hybrid publishing can mean many things in the publishing industry.

The term hybrid publishing is most commonly used to refer to writers who both self/indie and traditionally publish. It's important to remember that writers are coming at publishing from many directions. Some are indie publishing first and then signing traditional deals (or partial traditional deals just for the print version of their books). Others have been traditionally published in the past and are going indie either because they've been dropped by their publisher or because they want to try something new or have more control over their own work.

Paying a publishing house to publish your work can result in 2 to 3 times the cost of doing it yourself, sometimes with lower production quality. Some publishing houses have even been accused of fraud for failure to deliver on promises.

Hybrid publishing is also used to describe “assisted” indie or self-publishing, whereby a writer pays a publishing house (e.g. Author Solutions) to manage the production of their books, including finding an editor and cover designer and uploading the work to the various publishing platforms. This has historically been (and is sometimes still) called vanity publishing. However some will also refer to it as self-publishing or indie publishing. In general, this type of assisted indie or self-publishing is inadvisable for most writers considering going down the indie road, since it's essentially self-publishing at a higher cost (generally 2 to 3 times the cost of doing it yourself), sometimes with lower production quality.

There is evidence that some of these publishers make promises regarding promotion and sales that they don't fulfill and some of them have been accused of outright fraud. Writer Beware is a great website that often posts updates regarding these “publishers”, such as this story on [Author Solutions](#). Most of the large, traditional publishers now have some sort of “vanity-press” arm, so don't be taken in by their association with a large and respected publisher. If you have a large amount of money and

don't want to put the time in to learn how to publish your own work—or maybe you only have one book that you want to get out there—then this may be the path for you. However if you are seriously planning a career as an independent writer, most indie authors agree: assisted publishing is not the route to go.

Hybrid publishing is also used to describe new publishing arrangements and author collectives, such as [Wonderment Media](#), which publishes the Apocalypse Weird books. This category of publisher undertakes and covers the costs of the tasks traditionally undertaken by a publisher, but pays higher royalties, and retains some of the rights to the books (e.g. original characters or places created for those books). This is an emerging area of publishing and could really change the landscape for writers by giving them more control over their work and careers, while still providing some of the benefits of a publishing house.

Why Go Indie?

Indie publishing has increased dramatically in the last decade. It's gone from being a stigmatized and expensive undertaking (requiring commissioning a vanity press and having a garage full of inventory) to a legitimate option for writers. There are many reasons for the rise in indie publishing, and the indie road has, like everything else, advantages and disadvantages. Indie publishing is not for everyone, but it is a viable option and may be preferable for a lot of writers. Review the advantages and disadvantages carefully and decide if indie publishing may be for you.

Reasons for Rise in Indie Publishing:

- Print-on-demand paperbacks have reduced the need for large print runs and maintaining an inventory of books.
- There has been a dramatic rise in the availability and popularity of e-readers (and a subsequent demand for e-books), which are easier to produce than print books.
- A large number of high-quality freelance professionals (many of whom worked in traditional publishing) are now available for hire by indie writers, allowing indie writers to produce books of equal quality to traditionally published books.
- There has been a proliferation in the number of marketing sites that have huge subscriber lists of people looking for deals on e-books, and cater to indie writers in getting the word out about their e-books (e.g. Bookbub, Booksends, The Fussy Librarian, and Ereader News Today).
- A wide range of platforms that allow for self-publishing now exist, including Amazon (Kindle Direct Publishing, or KDP), Kobo, Nook, Google Play, iBooks, Scribd, and Smashwords.
- There is an increasing number of readers interested in buying indie books, in part because of the lower price point, but also because successful indie writers are delivering quality, unique material.

- An increasing number of indie writers are making a decent living, and some have sold up to 700,000 copies of their books (and are making much more than a decent living). Many writers, including traditionally published writers, are taking up indie publishing because it might offer a greater chance of making a living as a writer.

Advantages of Going Indie:

- You don't have to worry about getting published, which allows you to spend more time writing and less time querying agents and publishers.
- You can exercise a lot of control over your career and production schedule, which allows you to plan longer series and more frequent releases to build momentum.
- Due to the higher royalty structure of indie publishing—and the fact that you have more control over your release schedule and marketing—you have the **potential** to make more money.
- You get to have a more collegial relationship with the professionals whom you rely on for support (e.g. editors, designers) because *you* are *their* client.
- It allows you to be involved in—and bring your aesthetic and tastes to—every aspect of developing your product. If you have good taste and a unique style, this is a powerful thing and can be a vast improvement over the traditionally published industry, where you may have little influence regarding the editing, styling, and design of your book. Although many traditional publishers do a great job with book editing, styling, and design, they don't do a great job on every book, and their choices may not match your vision for your work.
- It allows you to learn about every aspect of book production, which will give you a better understanding of the industry as a whole and will probably make you a stronger writer.
- It enables you to control the marketing of your book, including when to have sales and when to engage in publicity. This, in turn, allows for a much longer shelf life and much more time for your book to become successful, instead of the make-or-break six-week window (considered the standard for whether a book is to be successful in the traditional publishing industry).
- There is an amazingly supportive and hardworking indie community, many of whom will help you if they can.
- Indie e-books sell almost as well as traditionally published e-books in certain genres, such as romance and science fiction/fantasy.

Disadvantages of Going Indie:

- **You probably won't make a lot of money—at least not right away**, and you will be out of pocket your costs. Most indie books only sell 100 copies. That will definitely not generate sufficient royalties to cover your production costs. Many indie books, even if they sell more than 100 copies, do not generate enough revenue to cover their costs. Just keeping it real here. A lot of indie writers **do** make a living from their work, and I believe you may have a

better chance of doing that than as a traditionally published writer. But let's face it, making a living as a writer is hard either way. Many indie writers note that they didn't really start to make it until they hit the three-year mark, so you have to be prepared to play the long game. But during that time, you can learn the nuts-and-bolts of indie publishing, and that in turn will help you be a better writer.

- You have to do everything yourself. If you don't like some aspects of publishing—like proofreading, learning grammar so you can vet editors, or understanding trim size and self-promotion—indie publishing can be challenging.
- Although it's changing, there's still a stigma associated with being an indie writer. Some people won't understand or might look down on you for your choices. You have to be prepared to be proud of being an indie, and keep in mind that many famous writers got their start by self-publishing.
- To be successful, most indie writers have to keep up a more intense production schedule with some of them producing up to 12 books a year. Realistically, you probably have to be prepared to write at least 2 to 3 books a year. If you're holding a day job to cover the bills, making that level of commitment can prove difficult.
- The indie community is very supportive of each other and do a lot of cross-promoting and reviewing of each other's works, and you might have to decide who you're going to support and how. This can be uncomfortable, and you have to be careful whom you throw your brand behind (as well as whom you choose not to support).
- Platform is essential to selling books, so you generally have to be willing to maintain a blog, Twitter account, and/or Facebook presence, and build an email subscriber list. Staying regularly in touch with your readers (without ostracizing them by spamming or soliciting them too often) is key to growing your readership and, eventually, providing you the marketing base you need to make a living as an indie author.
- Indie books generally don't sell as well as traditionally published books in literary fiction or children's books.
- Traditional publishers have well-established distribution systems for print books and will be able to get your book into bookstores, libraries, and schools. This is much more difficult for indie publishers. Even though some distribution systems exist, they are mostly ineffective, and unless you become a famous indie writer, you will be unlikely able to get your book into many bookstores. However, there are some presses—like Auspicious Apparatus Press—that are working hard to get indie authors into brick-and-mortar stores.
- It's hard work! Being a writer of any sort is hard work, but being an indie writer is even harder. You have to be ready to spend much of your spare time (and money) working on building your career from the ground up.

A Bit about the Stigma

We all know about the stigma of being an indie writer. Who hasn't heard the stage-whispered words: "She self-published..." at a party or literary event as if the person being discussed had just shown up drunk with a gigolo and their underwear on outside their pants?

Here in Canada, my traditionally published friends get invited to fun literary festivals and events that I am not invited to because indie publishing simply not recognized in Canada as being a legitimate path to publishing, even though in some cases I have just as many great reviews and have sold as many books as my friends have.

The reality is that as an indie published writer, you're going to face some stigma. Traditional publishing, while in many ways not better than indie publishing, is often perceived as better by the general public and certainly by the traditional publishing industry. It has cache and confers a sense of legitimacy on writers, and given that authors sometimes (often) doubt themselves and their work, this cache and legitimacy are important for some writers. There are some people who will openly declare that indie-published books are garbage, and in many cases, they aren't wrong. The democratization of publishing has allowed anyone to publish anything at any time, with nothing but their own aesthetic senses and innate abilities as the mechanisms for quality control. This has resulted in a huge glut of books that are poorly written and badly edited (if they are edited at all).

But many traditionally published books are garbage too, or reflect a certain aesthetic or trend within the publishing world that is not necessarily what readers are seeking. And many indie books are *not* garbage. The only option if you want to go the indie road is to ensure that your own products the best you can possibly produce and then stand behind them (but be willing to take feedback if you haven't quite hit the mark).

When you think about it, it's a bit ridiculous that a stigma exists for indie publishing. We have accepted indie movies and indie bands. Painting and other forms of art have always been in the realm of indie, in the sense that all artists have always been free to produce their original work and let the public decide if they like it. Artists do not require a stamp of approval from big art publishers for you to decide you like their work and hang it on your wall. Musicians put out indie records and tour around local clubs and restaurants to promote their work. They have local followings and fans. We do not refuse to go see a band because a big label has not signed it. We recognize and respect it either as an up-and-coming band learning their art and building a fan base, or a band with decent talent that we like to listen to that might never make it big. Indie filmmakers are respected by both those in the film industry and the public for having the guts, talent, and perseverance to put their work out there. They even celebrate their independence at annual events, like the Sundance Film Festival. Society doesn't tend to make fun of these other types of creators in the same way it lampoons indie authors.

Being traditionally published is not the only stamp of quality. Readers are the ultimate arbiters of whether a book is good or not.

The bottom line is that indie authors have to make it based on their talent, luck, and hard work just like all other artists and there's no reason why books and short stories require more curation than any other form of art. Traditional publishers can only accept so many manuscripts a year. They make educated guesses based on the large number of great manuscripts they receive (and their perceptions of the market) and publish the ones they think will sell

the most copies and make them a profit. As a result, many fantastic novels never get traditionally published. Being traditionally published is not the only stamp of quality. Readers are the ultimate arbiters of whether a book is good or not.

In 2013, I published a blog post on [the stigma of self-publishing](#), and it's still relevant— so check it out if you are still feeling uncertain on this front. I expect that the stigma associated with indie publishing will be gone within the next ten years as the industry changes, but until then you may have to be prepared to make your own cache and be confident about your choice to become an indie author (or at least fake it till you make it).

And realize, there are ups and downs in the traditionally published world too. Traditionally published writers

- get dropped by their publishers if they don't sell well,
- get rejected by their publisher and multiple other publishers for their second, third, and fourth books, and
- have to deal with a whole host of hierarchies and unspoken rules in the publishing world.

I have met and spoken to more demoralized traditionally published writers than indie writers. For most authors, there's no easy ride no matter which way you go.

Preparing Your Manuscript

When you indie publish, **you** make the final decision with regard to whether your manuscript (i.e. your unpublished novel or short story) is good enough to be published. The simple truth is, it has to be good enough or you will not find an audience. Readers are very quick to lambaste indie writers who have not put out a solid product. A common mistake is to publish too soon, before your manuscript is ready. So beyond writing and editing your manuscript, being able to evaluate the quality of your own manuscript is an essential element of being an indie writer.

This section focuses on the steps you should take to prepare your manuscript **before** it goes to the copyeditor.

Note: Copyediting is one of the last and most essential steps in your production process. Unless you are a professional copyeditor yourself and have the ability to edit your own work—which most writers don't—you'll have to get your manuscript copyedited. Keep in mind, "copyediting" can be defined in different ways. A good copyeditor will review your manuscript for grammar, punctuation, word choices, style, and accuracy. They might even perform plot and character analyses to help you see where readers might get confused. They will not, in general, suggest major changes to the content of the piece unless it is a "heavy" copyedit (or developmental edit, discussed below). Almost all indie writers have a copyeditor, and those that don't

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should. The copyediting process and how to find a copyeditor will be discussed further in the next section of this guide.

So what are some of the key steps you should take to prepare your manuscript before it goes to the copyeditor? They tend to vary based on a writer's experience and skill and can include some or all of the following:

1. **Write a first draft of your manuscript.** Remember the first draft is a *draft*. You know your own writing process and style. Some writers focus on just writing a “shitty” first draft and getting the words out, whereas others want to develop a more polished first draft. Both are fine, but the important thing is not to get stuck at the first-draft step. You'll need to redraft no matter what, so just get the words on the page.
2. **Do deep edits and write a second draft of your manuscript.** This is the time to really hone what your story is about and analyze and improve how you're telling it. Expect to make substantial changes in this round.
3. **Write as many additional drafts as necessary** to improve your manuscript until it is in your opinion as good as it can be. For your first novel, you may need to do more than three drafts.
4. **“Perform” a draft.** Read your novel out loud, as if you were doing a public reading. Reading out loud slows you down (compared to written or on-screen editing) and helps you focus on the texture, rhythm, and sound of language. Reading dialogue out loud helps you to hear whether it sounds natural or not. This step can really help you improve the natural flow of your writing.
5. **Take writing courses** through local colleges or writing groups, attend writing conferences, and study the craft of writing so you're better able to improve and evaluate your manuscript. Many writing courses offer the opportunity to peer-review your work (i.e. you read the work of other writers and they read yours and you exchange critiques), allowing you to get an assessment of some or all of your chapters.
6. **Learn to read like a writer** and compare your work to the work of other writers to see if it measures up. If you don't know what I mean by [reading like a writer](#), check out my blog post.
7. **Learn as much as you can about all aspects of writing.** In addition to taking writing courses and studying the books that you think are well written, you can also check out books and blog posts on writing. If I have a question, I take my time and research it. Consider it career training. I've done a lot of research over the past few years and written many posts on [key aspects of writing](#) on topics such as revealing character through dialogue, using too many adverbs, dialogue tags, and having multiple points-of-view. Sometimes the results are surprising and go against the “conventional” wisdom.
8. **Get a developmental edit of your manuscript.** Unlike a copyeditor, who generally focuses on the mechanics of your sentences and prose, a developmental editor looks at your manuscript at the story level and assesses whether it is working, which parts are working, and what needs to be fixed.

9. **Get beta readers to read and give you an honest opinion of your manuscript.** Beta readers are people who will read your manuscript and give you an honest opinion. In the case of a first-time writer, these will often be friends and family or members of your local writing group, although beta readers can be found online. Established writers often have established groups of beta readers.
10. **Read your manuscript critically.** Reading your manuscript critically, while painful, is one of the best ways to improve your work. Be prepared to hack and slash your own work, asking yourself questions like: Will the reader benefit from this? Is this dialogue necessary? Is there a fresher way I could say this? Are my characters speaking in unique voices or do they all sound the same? Could I say this more efficiently without losing the meaning? If you can push your way through this step, your manuscript will be significantly improved.

Though only the first two are absolutely essential, all these steps can help make your manuscript the best it can be. Experienced writers will likely drop some of these steps, and you don't have to perform them in the precise order outlined. Overall, the best and most important way to learn how to write, prepare a manuscript, and evaluate the readiness of your work is to **write...and then write some more.**

In the end, you are the final judge of whether your manuscript is ready to be sent off to the copyeditor. That is both the wonderful and terrible thing about indie publishing. However don't let this reality panic you. Do your best and send it off. A good copyeditor should be honest with you and send it back if they do not feel it is yet at a stage where it can be copyedited.

Note: Before you get your book formatted, you will at some point have to insert **front and back matter** into your manuscript. This includes the title page, book information page, acknowledgements, about the author page, a list of other books by you, etc. If you want this edited or at least reviewed for typos (always a good idea), you should incorporate this into your manuscript before you send it off to the editor.

Preparing front and back matter could be a whole discussion unto itself and there are many debates with regard to what you should or shouldn't include at the front and back of your book. Some authors will argue that you should put things such as excerpts from positive reviews, tables of contents, and links to your email list in the front, while others feel that it is best for readers to get right into the body of the work if they are using the "look inside" feature on Amazon. I have written a blog post analyzing what other authors include in their [front matter](#), and my best advice is to take a look at some of your e-books, a variety of books on Amazon, and some print books off your shelf to see how it's done. In the end, it's up to you. Use common sense as to what to include, but be sure and include essentials like copyright information that can protect your work.

Finding and Working with Editors and Designers

To produce an indie book, you will likely have to hire some aspects of your book production out. Being an indie writer means that you get to assemble and manage your own book

production team from the wide variety of talented professionals available. This is one of the best parts of being an indie writer.

Although some indie writers have sufficient graphic design skills and editing ability to do much of their book production themselves, it is generally not advisable, and especially not when starting out. Some writers develop these skills over time and eventually take on one or more roles they used to hire out to professionals. **However, in the beginning, most indie writers will need to work with at minimum:**

- A copyeditor;
- A book cover designer;
- An e-book formatter; and
- A print book formatter.

Some indie writers will also use a developmental editor and a proofreader (a type of copyeditor who *only* looks for typos), but the copyeditor is the most essential of the potential editorial options. Others employ marketers and assistants to upload their books to the publishing platforms. However, each additional professional is an additional cost, and the four listed above are the most essential as you start out. Often authors will use the same professional to do the e-book and print book formatting, but not always.

Ideally you want to identify and line up these professionals reasonably early so they are booked and available when you're ready for them so nothing slows down the production schedule. This will require setting some deadlines for yourself and sticking to them. Some writers will have their editor and cover designer working concurrently, or have their cover done once they're finished the first draft and have a strong sense of what their book is about, so it can be used for marketing purposes.

Finding and Working with a Good Editor

A good copyeditor is essential. Not only must you be able to have faith that the changes they're proposing are correct and improve your book for the better, you have to be able to have a relationship in which you can ask questions and make your own final decisions. You also want someone who is respectful of, and likes, your style and your work. You and your copyeditor are partners in the process, and you must view each other that way.

Finding a Good Editor

Within the indie world, you learn about great editors through word of mouth. However, when you're starting out, one of the best ways to find a good freelance editor is to simply go to the bestselling indie books on Amazon in your genre, use the "look inside" feature and identify the editor (generally noted either in the front matter or in the acknowledgements). **Make a list of some of the top editors, go to their websites, and see if they edit the kind of book you are writing.** This all takes a bit of sleuthing to develop a list of potential editors, but it is good and necessary market research anyway to know the big indie players in your genre and how they operate.

Note: You can usually identify indie books because they won't have a traditional publisher listed in the "sold by" line (indeed they will not have this line at all) just under the price in Amazon's Kindle book version. They will also often have the author's name listed as the publisher in the publisher line under book details (but not always—many authors set up their own publishing imprint). Price is often another rule of thumb for identifying an indie book. Indie e-books tend to be \$4.99 and lower, whereas traditionally published e-books are often more than \$10. Sometimes if you suspect a book is an indie book, you may have to go to the author's website to know for sure.

Once you have a list of potential editors, obviously the next step is to approach a few and find out if they are taking on new clients and how affordable their services are. **Ask them questions** such as whether they do a light or heavy copyedit and what that means to them. Generally, in a *light copyedit*, they will only fix things that are wrong (i.e. proofread), whereas in a *heavy copyedit*, they will make more in-depth, stylistic changes and might even insert comments regarding the story as a whole. You will also have to decide which type of copyedit your manuscript needs.

If you find an editor that fits your criteria, **ask them to edit a sample of your work**. This is essential before you commit to working with them for an entire manuscript. Most freelance editors, unless they are totally busy and not really interested in new clients, will edit five to fifteen pages of your work for free.

Don't worry about looking for editors that live somewhere near you or even in the same country. This is an international marketplace and everything is done online. My editor is from the United States, my cover designer is from the UK, and my formatter is from Australia.

Review the sample edit in detail. Consider the following:

- Are all of the changes the editor made correct? Review a grammar book when in doubt.
- Did they miss anything?
- Stylistically do you like their changes? Do you feel they improved your manuscript?
- Did they change too much? Did they change too little?

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You have to strike a balance when dealing with editors. Don't let your ego make you reject the editor's changes because you're too attached to your way of doing things. On the other hand, you should never accept changes you have questions about without discussing them with the editor. Editors are only human; they make mistakes too, and different editors will have different styles and approaches to grammar. While some rules of grammar and punctuation are pretty universal, others, particularly in fiction writing, are more like guidelines. Your editor needs to be able to explain their philosophy when it comes to grammar, indicate which style guide they prefer to use, and consistently apply their own rules across your novel. Moreover, if you have a certain grammar or punctuation style (such as not using quotation marks or capital letters), provided this is an accepted style in fiction writing, your editor should

be willing to accept this and work within it, provided you prepare a style guide for them to utilize. You need to know what you are doing though if you are going to stray too far from conventions.

Finding an editor who understands your style and goals for the piece and has the ability to improve your prose is essential. You also want an editor who's going to work for their money by going deep enough into the prose to improve it. If all your editor has done is add four commas over five pages, they're not earning their pay. (No writer is that good!) You want to see some substantive changes on almost every page. At the same time, you don't want an editor that rips your manuscript apart and essentially rewrites it—unless you sent them a really bad manuscript in the beginning. In that case, if they are a good editor, they will stop after a couple of chapters and tell you that you need to do a rewrite or find a developmental editor.

Take your time, and find the right editor. This may involve getting a few sample edits and picking the one that you think fits your work the best. Sometimes it may mean switching editors until you find the right one.

Working with an Editor

Once you have picked your editor and set a date, make whatever contracting arrangements are required. Some editors will require a formal contract with a deposit up front and full payment before they will give you the edits. Others will just give you the edits and trust you to pay them later. It will depend on the editor. When your due date comes, submit your manuscript. Depending on its length, you'll generally receive your edits back (usually via the Track Changes feature in Word) within one to three weeks of submitting your work.

Remember, the editor works for *you*, not the other way around. As the publisher of your own work, *you* get to make the final decisions with regard to the copyedits—but make sure you know what you're doing if you decide to go against the advice of your editor.

Once you get the changes back from the editor, take the opportunity to learn about grammar, punctuation, and your own writing peccadilloes. **Study the suggested edits.** Were they careless mistakes, or things that you didn't know? With each piece you write, you want to be able to improve your own self-editing skills so editing costs you less in the future and you produce cleaner manuscripts from the get-go. If you don't understand a change that the editor made, **ask the editor** about their suggestion. Good editors are willing to explain their rationale for some of their changes. Learn from them. But remember, the editor works for *you*, not the other way around. As the publisher of your own work, *you* get to make the final decisions regarding the copyedits—but make sure you know what you're

doing if you decide to go against the advice of your editor.

Sometimes completing the copyedit will require **a few exchanges of the manuscript** between you and the editor, as you accept their changes and add new material to address their comments. Be sure and establish beforehand whether your editor will do these additional reviews, and, if so, whether there's an extra charge for them. Remember you are engaging in a professional relationship, so be conscious and considerate of the editor's time. Don't add a bunch of new material in your second round and expect them to edit the new content at no

extra charge unless you have cleared this with them ahead of time. Your editor is the most important professional you will work with in the production of your book. And, if you intend to publish more than one novel, they might be your partner for a very long time. It's essential that you have a good relationship with them, and open lines of communication are critical.

After the copyedit is done and you've accepted (or rejected) all of the suggested changes, I highly recommend that you (or someone you know with a sharp eye) **proofread** your manuscript. There will undoubtedly be mistakes introduced or missed during the copyedit process; there always are. It's your job to catch them. If you don't feel confident in your own skills to do this, you can hire a proofreader. You might want to for your first manuscript or two; but another stark reality is that nobody will care about your manuscript as much as you do or proofread it as thoroughly; and learning to proofread thoroughly is an essential skill you'll benefit from your entire career. Don't go overboard on this step. I nearly drove myself insane proofreading my first novel as I believed that a single typo would cost me my indie career. This is not the case. Most readers will overlook a couple of typos. They happen in traditionally published books too. However having more than a handful of typos is not advisable.

Finding and Working with a Good Cover Designer

A good cover design is also a must. The cover design is the reader's first encounter with your book and if it looks unprofessional or is inappropriate for your genre or book, they will move right on past to their next reading option.

Finding a Good Cover Designer

I know of **four potential ways to find a good cover designer**. Ideally, you should use a combination of them to select a designer right for you:

- Browse covers in your genre, find indie ones that you like, and use the "look inside" option at your favorite e-book outlet to find out who designed the cover.
- Google "e-book cover designers" or "pre-made e-book covers" and browse the portfolios of the designers that come up.
- Go to [Joel Friedlander's e-book cover design awards](#), which run every month on Joel's website. Look at the winners for several months running. Joel, a designer himself, comments on most of the covers submitted and it is a great way to learn about good design.
- Go to www.99designs.ca where you can pay to have a bunch of designers compete to design a cover for you and pick the one that you like the best. The more you pay, the more designers compete. This is a great way to see the work of a bunch of different designers and find one that suits your style.

Once you have a list of potential cover designers, go to their websites, and check out their prices and whether they are accepting new clients. Things to look for include:

- What is their general aesthetic and style? Do they favor busy covers or clean, simple covers? What colors do they tend to use? Do they put people, landscapes or

inanimate objects on their covers? Do they do collage-type covers or favor a single image? Do all their covers have the same “look” or do they vary their cover designs?

- Do they specialize in a specific genre or genres? More importantly, do they do covers in your genre?
- Do they do original illustrations or use stock photos? This is a very important consideration if you want original art, which is often seen on fantasy or science fiction covers. Stock photos are cheaper but also more generic.
- What is their process? Will they offer you a few options to choose from or will they make changes to the original design based on your feedback? How many changes are they willing to make without charging you more for doing them?

Pre-made covers are somewhat generic and will not reflect the thematic intent of your book in the same way an original design would. However, premade covers are cost effective and often get the job done.

It's important to note that **you can buy a pre-made cover for much less money** than a cover specifically designed for your book. Many pre-mades will be for your exclusive use, meaning that they will not be sold to anyone else. However pre-mades are just that—pre-made and somewhat generic. They will not, therefore, reflect the thematic intent of your book in the same way an original design would. However, pre-made covers are cost effective and often get the job done. If you look through enough of them, you can luck upon one that suits your manuscript perfectly.

When you buy a pre-made cover, the designer will put your name and book title on the cover and may make some other minor, typeface changes at your

request. How much a designer is willing to tailor a pre-made cover depends entirely on them. Pre-mades are also generally **e-book** covers only (i.e. they only have a front cover and do not include a spine or a back cover) and therefore cannot be used if you are also intending to publish a print book. Print book covers must be tailored to the **trim size** of the book (see below for a description of trim size).

But if you're just starting out, only intend to do an e-book, and happen across the perfect pre-made cover for your book—or are putting out a short story that you do not expect to make a lot of money from—pre-made covers can be a viable and less expensive option and trim size is a moot point.

Working with a Cover Designer

Assuming you are not buying a pre-made cover, **you have to play an active role in your cover design** as an indie writer. This is a great opportunity you wouldn't have in the traditional publishing world, where you're given a cover and have no choice but to say, “Wow, I love it!” even if you don't. Different cover designers will ask for more or less input from you, but the good ones will expect you to do some homework with regard to what good book covers look like, what the covers look like in your genre (all genres are different), and what the main or essential themes and images in your book are. They know that, the better prepared you are on the front end of the process, the less time they'll have to spend tinkering with the design

later on. My cover designer has me fill out a detailed questionnaire in which I am asked to provide the title of my novel and outline settings, characters, themes, and events, provide examples of covers in my genre that I like and do not like, and provide any specific instructions with regard to how I want my cover to look. Other designers may ask for less input, but generally speaking they will ask questions to help direct them. Some designers will also want your blurb for the back of the book ahead of time, while others are willing to wait for this and add it in later.

You'll also need to indicate whether **you are looking for an e-book cover or both an e-book and print book cover** and specify the trim size of your book.

Trim size is essentially the size of the book, and there are conventions in trim size for each genre of books (e.g. mass-market paperbacks and children's books tend to be smaller, whereas literary fiction books tend to be larger). But there are no hard and fast rules. The length of your book is also a consideration. For a longer book you might want to pick a larger trim size in order to reduce the number of pages (and the printing cost) of the print version of the book. Read my blog post on [trim size](#) for some general ideas. The two main print book platforms, CreateSpace and Lightning Source, offer a range of trim size options. Determine what the options are, take some books off your shelf, and get out your ruler. Measure the books and decide what size you want. Note that the options for trim size offered by CreateSpace and Lightning Source are more limited than the range of options you'll find on your bookshelf because traditional publishers use a wide range of trim sizes.

The more specifically you can describe what you want both at the outset and the changes you would like to see to the initial design, the more likely you are to get what you want—and the more likely the designer is to want to work with you again.

Once you give your designer the information they're looking for, they should present you with one or two options from which to choose. They should also be willing to take suggestions or changes to one of those options once you've made your choice. Take advantage of that. As with the copyeditor, you are the designer's client; they're the professional you've *hired* and you should listen closely to their counsel about design issues. At the end of the day, though, you're the one paying the bill and you should get what you want. But be reasonable with your expectations. Once you've paid for one design (or two to choose from), no designer is going to go back to the drawing board ten times while you tinker. The more specifically you can describe what you want both at the outset and the changes you would like to see to the initial design, the more likely you are to get what you want—and the more likely the designer is to want to work with you again.

Note: You'll need your print book formatted (see below) before your print cover can be finalized. Your cover designer will need to know the precise number of pages in order to determine your spine thickness. If you're using CreateSpace, once you've formatted your print book, there's a template creator where you input the number of pages, select the type of paper (white or cream), and input your trim size. CreateSpace then provides you a template, which you send to your cover designer in order to finish the print cover. This is another one of the things you'll need to keep moving along concurrently in your book production process.

Finding and Working with a Good E-Book Formatter

A good e-book formatter is perhaps less essential than a good cover designer and editor, since it's more of a technical undertaking and there are lots of formatters who can do the same job. Eventually, if you are technically adept in Microsoft® Word or one of the major e-book publishing programs, this may be the first task you can take on yourself. Many authors do.

E-book formatters take your Word or Scrivener file and turn it into either **mobi** or **epub** files for you to upload to the various publishing platforms. If you're just starting out, you may only be using the Amazon KDP platform, in which case you will need a **mobi file**. All of the other e-book platforms use **epub files**, and some beta and review readers prefer epub as well, depending on the type of e-reader they have. So it's worthwhile to get both files. Sometimes there's a minimal extra cost for both formats, but often formatters will provide both for the same price.

Technically, you could bypass the mobi and epub formatting step. You can now upload a Word or PDF file to many of the platforms, potentially saving yourself the costs associated with that step. However, in my experience—and other authors might disagree—it's not recommended. For example, simply uploading a Word file to KDP will produce a passable mobi file, but functionality such as the table of contents feature in later model Kindles won't work properly. Also, when you spend a lot of time working in a Word file using the Track Changes feature, a lot of invisible code is incorporated into the file. You may not be able to see it, but it's there. Getting the table of contents and indenting to render properly is also challenge. The very technically proficient can do it, but even though I consider myself pretty adept with most things technical, I have yet to be able to produce a perfect mobi file. Nothing screams indie or unprofessional like a badly formatted book with a ragged right edge or chapter headings at the bottom of a page. There are many reasonably priced e-book formatters who can help you and, after you've spent your hard-earned cash on editing and cover design, you might as well spring for the minimal extra funds for formatting at least when you start out. I plan to start trying to take on more of my formatting now, but I'm five books in and fairly technically adept.

Finding a Good E-book Formatter

A good way to find a reliable formatter is to Google e-book formatters and start looking through them. Price and turn-around time will be two of the key considerations—generally speaking, middle of the road prices lead to the best results—as well as number of positive references from indie writers. There are lots of e-book formatters out there and they're reasonably easy to find.

Working with an E-book Formatter

The e-book formatter will take your e-book cover (**note:** you will need the cover at this point, so plan out your process carefully) and Word file and clean it up and send you back a mobi and/or epub file. You can help them (and lower your cost) at the outset by maintaining a relatively clean Word file using consistent stylings throughout your manuscript (e.g., "Heading 1" for all of your chapter headings), making sure you don't change fonts or line spacing within the document (except in the front and back matter), using page breaks between chapters, and *not* using tabs for your paragraph indentations.

To review your mobi and epub files, you will need a Kindle application on your computer (if you don't have a Kindle) and an epub reader (I use Calibre, which is free). You need to review your files when you get them back to make sure they look like an e-book file should look and there are no mistakes. Formatters make mistakes too, so check your files carefully.

Once your book has been formatted as an e-book, this is a really good opportunity to re-proofread. Reviewing your manuscript in a different format often causes those last few niggling mistakes to jump out at you. Most formatters will correct up to 30 minor typos at no extra charge or more for a minimal extra charge. Have these changes made. Nothing turns readers off—or screams “amateur!”—like typos.

Finding and Working with a Good Print Formatter

Print book formatting is generally done in either Word or Adobe® InDesign and then turned into a PDF for uploading to the print book platforms (usually Amazon CreateSpace or Lightning Source). As with your cover design, you'll need to know your trim size in advance.

InDesign is the professional formatting program graphic designers use for high-end products like brochures. It's the Cadillac of print formatting programs. It's more expensive and it looks more professional with better typeface options and tighter formatting. For non-fiction books with lots of graphics or pictures, it's probably necessary. However for novels—which typically don't have a lot of high-end graphics—it's not necessarily required, and you can get away with a Word-formatted print document. The cost for InDesign formatting can be 8 times more expensive than Word formatting, so make this decision carefully. It will look marginally better for a document that is largely composed of copy, but is it worth it given that most readers will never know the difference? I had my first two books formatted in InDesign, and they look great, but when I presented four of my books to readers at a workshop and asked them which they thought were formatted in InDesign and which they thought were formatted in Word, they couldn't tell the difference.

The cost for InDesign formatting can be 8 times more expensive than Word formatting, so make this decision carefully.

If you're going with basic Word formatting, the same formatter who did your e-book can often format your print books as well. They'll have a basic format and typeface (font) that

Take ten or twenty books off your shelf and look closely at how they're formatted. Make notes about your stylistic preferences, measure margin sizes, and talk to your formatter about them.

they use (often Garamond 11), although you can make special requests with regard to running heads (at the top of the page), page numbers, line spacing, margin size, and chapter heads. With InDesign formatting, you have a lot more options for typefaces and designs, but even with Word's less diverse tools, you should be able to make slight adjustments to suit your preferences.

Whether you go with InDesign or Word formatting, interior book design is an art, and a well-designed book enhances the reader's experience. Take ten or twenty books off your shelf and look closely at how they're formatted. Make notes about your stylistic

preferences, measure margin sizes, and talk to your formatter about them.

If you want to do your print formatting yourself, Joel Friedlander offers some excellent [Word templates for sale](#). If you are very conversant with Word and want to save money, this may be the way to go. An added bonus is that, when you discover typos or other minor mistakes later in the process, you can correct them yourself without going back to the formatter.

As with the e-book format, once you get the PDF version of your print book, you need to check everything over carefully. Are the chapter headings on new pages? Are there typos in the running heads? Are the page numbers consecutive? Check everything twice. Your formatter will usually fix a certain number of typos or errors free of charge.

Costs and Potential Incomes

Okay so this is the section you've been waiting for. How much money can you expect to shell out as an indie author? And how much money can you expect to make?

Costs

Below are some cost ranges for each of the major types of professionals you will likely hire to prepare your book for publication.

Editing

Copyediting is often on a per-word, per-page, or per-hour basis, so the longer your manuscript, the higher the cost. Some editors will also adjust their quote based on the number of errors they see in your sample manuscript, so the cleaner your manuscript, the lower your cost. Others just have a flat per-word cost, regardless of the manuscript's condition. They will generally specify these parameters on their website.

Yes, editing can cost a lot of money, but at the end of the day you have to ask yourself: what is my authorial reputation worth to me?

For a medium length novel (80,000 to 100,000 words), you can expect to pay **as little as \$800 or up to \$5,000**. As with everything else, you get what you pay for. Going with someone who only charges \$800 will usually get you a lighter, less professional copyedit, but if you are a clean writer and don't want any developmental input in the copyedit, this may be okay. I pay about \$2,500 per full-length manuscript for editing and I've found it to be worth every penny.

Remember: quality is everything. Early poor reviews can create a poorly rated work very quickly. Yes, editing can cost a lot of money, but at the end of the day you have to ask yourself: what is my authorial reputation worth to me?

Cover Design

Cover design is usually a flat rate per cover depending on whether you want just an e-book cover (an image that acts as a “front cover” on an e-book), or both an e-book and print cover (with its spine, front and back).

Pre-made covers can be as low as \$10 (and are usually unattractive and very generic) to as high as \$120 (often more professional looking). Covers created specifically for you can range from as low as \$100 to as high as \$800 (or higher, if you're commissioning original artwork).

If I'm going with pre-made covers, I pay \$60 to \$120. For an original cover, my designer charges **\$400 per cover** (and does an amazing job, by the way).

Changes to your cover (after whatever changes your designer included in their original estimate) can cost you extra. Purchasing the rights to specific photos or fonts can also cost extra. Stock photo sites such as Dreamstime.com or istockphoto.com outline policies on their websites regarding artwork (e.g. whether your purchase of the artwork is royalty-free or requires a per-use royalty payment). If you are sourcing your own artwork, be sure to read, understand, and follow these policies or the copyright holder for the artwork could sue you for using their photos or illustrations without permission.

Book Formatting

Book formatting costs also depend on word count, with longer books generally costing more. For both a mobi and epub file of a full-length novel submitted in a relatively clean Word document with chapter headings, etc., you can expect to pay **\$80**.

For print formatting in Word, the cost is between **\$100 and \$150**, or higher (but don't pay more unless you can't get a better deal). For print formatting in InDesign, you can pay as low as \$125—though I *don't* advise going with this low-end version; the experience will match the price—to as high as \$1000.

Overall Cost per Book

If you don't go with a proofreader, you can expect to pay in the neighborhood of **\$1,500 (on the very low end) to \$4,000 (on the moderate but reasonable end)** to get your book ready for publication. If you go with a vanity-press/assisted self-publishing house, expect to pay more.

You can expect to pay in the neighborhood of **\$1,500 (on the very low end) to \$4,000 (on the moderate but reasonable end)** to get your book ready for publication.

Along the way, there will probably be additional minor costs, such as copyright registration (if you decide to do it), purchasing an ISBN number (if you are not in Canada and decide you want one), and other things. But those costs outlined above are the main and essential costs.

You will also probably need to market your book (see Tactics That Increase Success below), which costs money. However this is separate from book production, so it is dealt with in the next section.

Potential Incomes

So everyone knows that royalties from indie books are higher, and they are, but that does not mean that incomes are higher—because you're the publisher, and **you still have to earn enough to cover your costs.**

Amazon's KDP pays 70 percent royalties on books that are priced between \$2.99 and \$9.99 and 35 percent royalties on books that are priced below \$2.99 or above \$9.99. CreateSpace pays about \$2.00 in royalties on print books purchased directly from Amazon, and only a few cents per book for books sold through extended distribution (e.g. books ordered by bookstores or ordered outside the United States). Independent bookstores will charge whatever price you negotiate—but since they expect a 40 percent markup (and you still have to cover your costs for the shipping, printing and border fees for the books), you can expect to earn about \$1.00 to \$2.00 per book sold in an independent bookstore.

So, doing the math to earn out on a full-length book for which you paid \$4,000 in production costs—and assuming you have priced your e-book at \$2.99 (which is a common indie price)—you will need to sell **2,000** e-books or print books (@\$2.00 per book to recoup the \$4,000 in production costs) before you start making a profit. To make a reasonable income, you'd need to sell **17,000 books per year** (\$34,000 @ \$2 profit per book) to make \$30,000 annually (after recouping production costs).

Given that most indie books sell only 100 copies, and a bestseller in Canada is only 1,000 books, **this is not a small undertaking.** Needless to say, it's generally not a good idea to quit your day job immediately hoping to cash in on the indie publishing cash cow after one novel. But before you get completely depressed and give up before you start, keep in mind that some indie authors **are** making a living.

To make money, most writers have to play **the long game** and don't start turning even a minimal profit before the **three-year or five-book mark.**

Starting to make money is possible if you continue to increase the number of books you have for sale and follow some of the tactics for success outlined below. To make money, most writers have to play **the long game** and don't start turning even a minimal profit before the **three-year or five-book mark.** Historically, for most authors writing has not been a lucrative proposition, so there are other reasons for writing and publishing (e.g. personal gratification, enjoying interactions with readers, learning your craft) that go beyond making money. Keep those in mind as you move forward. As a get-rich-quick scheme though, you're likely to be more successful buying lottery tickets.

Publishing Platforms

There are a wide variety of self-publishing platforms, which are basically the market places in which your books will be sold.

E-books

On the e-book front, there are the following key platforms:

- Amazon KDP,
- Kobo,
- Nook,
- Google Play,
- iBooks,
- Scribd, and
- Smashwords.

Amazon KDP is the big one, and the majority of e-books (some say 70 percent or higher) are sold through KDP. Most writers sell the majority of their e-books on KDP. However there are exceptions. If you only do **one platform** (and there are reasons for doing so, since Amazon rewards exclusivity), Amazon is the one to choose. However, the other platforms are coming along and could exceed Amazon in a few years, so there are benefits to **diversification** too. Learning the ins and outs of each platform and what sells books on each can be challenging though, so if you're just starting out, it might be best to go with KDP until you know what you're doing. You can also sell e-books directly off your website, but unless you have a large following and lots of daily visitors, you are unlikely to make money this way at least at the start.

There are also **aggregators** (e.g. Smashwords and Draft2Digital) that will upload your book to all of the platforms for a cut of your royalties (e.g. Draft2Digital takes 10 percent). If you are just starting to diversify, an aggregator may be the way to go. Most successful writers agree, though, that working with each individual platform directly and fine-tuning your offering (in terms of your book description, book categories, key words and pricing) for each platform results in greater sales. This is a lot of work, though, so again it may be best to put off this option until you are a few years in and know the ropes better.

For each platform you will need to

- set up an account,
- learn how to work the dashboard (where you manage your e-books),
- enter your book information (including your cover, book blurb, book file, genre categories, and pick keywords), and
- set a price.

Preparing your book blurb is yet another art form, and there have been many books and guides written on that. I suggest you look them up, as it is a skill I have yet to completely master.

I strongly recommend setting up your KDP account at least **three months** before your planned publication date and start inputting the required information right away. Some of that information, such as keywords and genre categories, will probably require some research. There have been entire books written on how to best pick these meta-data terms in

order to benefit from Amazon's search algorithms. Take plenty of time to do your research on these; don't rush through and guess at the best key words the night before you want to publish.

International Tax Issues

If you are not an American citizen, you will also have to fill in and submit the appropriate forms (W8-BEN) properly, so you do not have 30 percent taxes withheld by the U.S. government. Canada and several other countries have a reciprocal agreement with the United States regarding tax collection, which means that as a Canadian, you are entitled not to have any taxes withheld by the U.S. government, provided you fill out the forms correctly. This used to involve a very challenging process of getting a US tax number, but apparently this has changed, and you only need a tax number from your own country. These are all important steps and take some time to learn.

Getting your U.S. tax number, if you need one, and/or filling in the correct forms can take several weeks of being on hold with the IRS and submitting the right information. [Catherine Howard](#) offers some of the best guidance about the steps you need to take to get your U.S. taxes sorted out. It might take a while for you to figure out which forms to fill in and how to do it. Nevertheless, there is a huge community of indie writers out there who've shared their experiences on this front. I encountered almost no problem that a few hours of Googling or reading others' experiences couldn't resolve. Some writers even post their completed W8-BEN forms so you can see what information needs to go where.

Print Books

For print books, you can sell them on Amazon, BarnesandNoble.com, directly off your own website, and in indie bookstores. When you get your book produced by CreateSpace, which is an Amazon company, it will automatically be listed in the Amazon store, but you'll have to manually list it at Barnes and Noble. I have yet to bother with Barnes and Noble—I sell so few print books from Amazon that I have not considered it worth investing my time in a second platform for printed books.

You will have to approach indie bookstores on your own with a sell sheet, sample of your book and proposal for prices. It is best to show them positive reviews on Amazon as well. This is a bit of work, but most indie bookstores—at least the ones in your local area—are very supportive, and I have sold far more print books through indie bookstores than online. Getting your print book into an indie bookstore may require you to develop a **sell sheet**, which is basically a nicely formatted single page summary of your book details, including a shot of the cover, blurb, quotes from a few reviews, the trim size, the ISBN number and the price. You can see samples of my sell sheets in my blog post in my [marketing your book](#) series.

There are distributors that will try to sell your book into bookstores for you, but in my experience, you have to expect to move a lot of books (which is unlikely) to make their contract terms worth your time and effort.

As with the e-book platforms, you will need to set up an account with whatever print book platforms you choose and become conversant with using it. Just because you have a KDP account with Amazon does not mean all of your information is automatically transferred to CreateSpace—although connected (your print version shows up as an alternative on the

Kindle listing and vice-versa), they are separate platforms. As with your e-book, I strongly recommend you start inputting your data and figuring out what you need to do and how to use each of the platform dashboards at least three months in advance of your publication date.

The Writing Life

The writing life, while often romanticized, can be hard and lonely—but there are also great rewards. To be a successful indie author, you have to pump out a lot of books in a short period of time, engage in all the production aspects of those books, interact with fans and other writers, blog and be active on social media, keep up with industry happenings, and manage your career. It is a lot of work! Emotionally it can be tough too. You'll have to deal with receiving bad reviews, low sales days (or weeks or months), rejection by the big marketers, days when the words just don't come, and bad experiences with the professionals with whom you're working.

The writing life, while often romanticized, can be hard and lonely—but there are also great rewards.

On the positive side, you get to receive great messages from fans, read great reviews of your work (yes, those come too), make lots of writer friends in the indie world, work with fantastic professionals who can improve your writing immensely, and, most importantly, you get to write and create your own worlds on your own terms, which is probably one of the biggest gifts in the world.

If you're hoping to eventually make money from your writing, you probably need to have **2-3 hours a day** (including weekends and holidays) to put towards your writing career at the outset, and try to write a minimum of two books a year.

Depending on your goals as an indie writer, the time requirements associated with being an indie writer will vary. If you're hoping to eventually make money from your writing, you probably need to have **2-3 hours a day** (including weekends and holidays) to put towards your writing career at the outset, and try to write a minimum of two books a year. More hours and more books are better. For someone who is working full time, this is challenging (but doable—indie authors around the world do it every day). As you become more established and start to generate income from your writing, you can potentially step away from your day job (or reduce the hours you devote to the day job) and increase the time you spend writing and the number of books you produce a year. Some would argue that you will never make it as an indie writer

unless you quit your job and start simply pumping out 6 to 10 books a year. This is a valid argument that has worked for some indie writers. However it's a risky strategy, especially if you cannot get your day job back should you fail to make a living wage at the keyboard. If you have lots of savings, can easily get your job back or a new job, and have a clear idea of your time horizon, it might be worth the risk—but think very carefully before choosing this strategy.

If you don't have an eye toward making a living as an indie writer or are not sure if you do, you might be able to establish yourself as an indie writer with fewer hours a day. But don't underestimate the amount of time it takes to write and publish a book. Being an indie writer is hard work, and if you don't put in the blood, sweat, and tears, it'll show in the quality of your products.

The most important part of the indie writing life, if you want to be successful, is to treat it like a career and bring your best skills, work ethic, and attitude to the job. Writing is a lot of fun, but it's not the same as going on a holiday or spending your day recreating (and believe me, you will have to spend days toiling at your keyboard while your non-writing friends holiday and recreate).

Tactics That Increase Success

Much has been written about tactics that increase success in indie publishing, and that too could be the subject of an entire workshop. I have written extensively about marketing your book on my blog www.jenniferellis.ca, and many of my key tips are outlined in more detail there. Specifically, I have written a series entitled [Marketing Your Book—A Primer](#) Parts One through Eight that covers many of the essential parts of marketing including giveaways, sales, reviews, blog tours, blogging, freebies, price pulsing, and social media.

There are also blogs, books, and podcasts (such as the [Sell More Books Show](#)) devoted to helping you become a success in the indie world. Some of the most important tips I can offer based on my past two years in the industry are:

- **Put out the most professional product that you can.** Nothing is going to hurt you as much as a crappy product, which will result in bad reviews and limited sales. Make doing your best work your number one priority; while being cost-aware in your production costs is important, don't scrimp too much.
- **Market your book.** To sell your book, you have to market your book. There are many marketing platforms with thousands of subscribers devoted to selling indie books. [BookBub](#) is the biggest and most important marketing platform (and the most expensive and difficult to get listed on), but there are others, including The Fussy Librarian, E-reader News Today, and BookSends that perform well and are less costly. There are lots of blogs out there rating the performance of these marketing platforms. You will have to plan to discount your book, apply to the platforms and pay a fee to have your book listed (\$15 for some of the smaller platforms and up to \$600 for BookBub, depending on your genre and the price you are listing your book at). You will need positive reviews on Amazon and a good product in order to qualify. Some require as few as 4 reviews to apply, but many require 10 or more, and BookBub can require up to 100. Sometimes the cost of marketing pays for itself in terms of book sales, but sometimes it doesn't. But it increases the visibility and Amazon ranking of your book. Some authors argue against doing a lot of marketing until you have a big backlist of books or an established series in order to benefit from cross-sales to your other books when you run a promotion. However, even with a single book, a little bit of marketing in order to build your audience and get those essential reviews is helpful. Just don't spend too much until you have more books.

- **Get reviews.** In order to even be considered by the marketing platforms, you need reviews. There are a myriad of ways to get them (many of which aren't very effective) including doing Goodreads Giveaways of print books, asking people who read your book explicitly for reviews, listing your book on review sites (Book Rooster, Choosy Bookworm, Net Galley—all of which charge a fee and do not guarantee reviews), giving away as many e-books as you can at Facebook parties and via ARCs (Advance Reader Copies) and wait and hope. Getting reviews is generally a combination of all of these. *Do not* pay for reviews and *do not* exchange reviews with other authors. This is against Amazon's Terms of Service, and you don't want to risk getting booted by the biggest platform in indie publishing.
- **Network with other authors.** You'll have to become part of many author groups on Facebook and elsewhere. You'll be invited to join some, you'll fall in to some, you'll ask to join some (and some might not accept you—don't take it personally). Some are good and comprised of hardworking, professional writers. Others are chock full of unprofessional crazies who will spam you and ask you to review their books every chance they get. You'll have to find your way on this front, but relationships with other indie authors are essential to getting invited to be part of anthologies, marketing ventures, and boxed sets, not to mention providing you with much-needed support while you're sitting alone at your desk with your cat. (And don't forget to offer your own support to others authors. You have to give a little to get a little. No one likes a mooch.)
- **Play the long game.** Most writers, indie or otherwise, have to play the long game. While first book successes do happen, most writers who break out have been working at it for ten or more years and have many books under their belt. Making it as a writer generally requires playing the long game and increasing your success bit by bit, year after year. So give yourself a time horizon, write up a business plan (you can look at my [business plan](#) on my website), have an idea of how much you are willing to invest at the get-go (it's like any other business), and *don't give up*.
- **Write in series or in hot genres.** As much as we all want to write our self-indulgent literary tomes, they do not sell on Amazon. Okay maybe most of us don't really want to do that, and I know literary fiction, self-indulgent or otherwise, is important. I write literary fiction, and I am not bashing it, really. Nevertheless, if you are an indie writer, you really have to consider writing books in a series, which sell better and give you a lot more marketing options (e.g., making the first book free, or the first two books free), or writing in a hot genre. Romance outsells all other genres on Amazon and every other platform. Some writers write their literary novels under their own name, and their racy romance novels under a pen name to pay the bills. It's just something to consider.
- **Have a platform, build an email list, and be an all-round nice person.** Readers these days want writers they can connect with online. You have to be willing to put your personality out there, even just a little bit, and interact with readers to sell books. Thus, you'll probably need to have a blog, be on Twitter and Facebook (even if you don't consider yourself a "social person"). Yes, big writers do not have to do this because readers seek *them* out; but you are not big yet, so you have to reach out via social media to connect with readers. Being a nice, approachable person is a must. The true indie community is small, and people help each other. If you are not nice, people will hear about it. You will also have to build your email list. A robust email list allows you to

notify your potential readers every time you have a sale and/or new release, which can help you achieve a base level of sales and visibility. It also allows you to engage your fans and give them opportunities to receive ARCs and other giveaways. Building an email list is about offering valuable content all the time, though, and not just spamming your subscribers.

Starting Your Journey

I hope this short guide has provided you with some useful information in starting your journey down the indie road. As I noted before, it's not intended to be a comprehensive roadmap, but rather an overview that can help you make the decision whether or not you even want to go indie and, if you choose to, get you started.

Three books that I found really helpful in starting my own journey down the indie road include:

1. [The Indie Author Survival Guide](#) by Susan Kaye Quinn
2. [How I Sold 30,000 eBooks on Amazon's Kindle-An Easy-To-Follow Self-Publishing Guidebook 2015 Edition](#) by Martin Crosbie
3. [Let's Get Digital: How To Self-Publish, And Why You Should: Updated Second Edition \(Let's Get Publishing Book 1\)](#) by David Gaughran

Indie authors are an incredibly generous crew and are generally happy to share their wisdom on all things indie, so check out the books I've listed above. If in doubt, just Google your question—some indie author will have likely shared the answers you're looking for.

Indie publishing is both challenging and rewarding, and I wish you luck on your own journey down the indie road.

About the Author

Jennifer Ellis is an indie and hybrid writer of middle-grade fiction ([A Pair of Docks](#) and [A Quill Ladder](#)), adult dystopic fiction ([In the Shadows of the Mosquito Constellation](#) and [Apocalypse Weird: Reversal](#)) and sort-of contemporary romance ([Confessions of a Failed Environmentalist](#)—forthcoming). She has been a bestselling author on Amazon in time travel fiction, and [Synchronic](#), an anthology to which she contributed, hit #16 in the Amazon store. She has sold considerably more than 100 books on Amazon and considerably less than 500,000, but she is still working toward that as her goal.

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Currently residing in College Station, Texas, Chris Pourteau has made a living at one time or another as a teacher, a lab technician helping to recover one of Christopher Columbus's

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