

PATHWAYS TO PUBLICATION

The three routes to getting your book published

1. TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING

Large publishers

A literary agent submits your proposal to publishers on your behalf – or, if their submission guidelines allow, you can submit your proposal directly to them. If a publisher makes an offer, they pay you an advance against future royalties and take on all the costs of editing, design, printing, distribution and marketing. You earn royalties once the advance has earned out.

Large publishers offer the fullest access to distribution: your book will be available through major retailers, independent bookshops and international markets. Their marketing budgets can secure prominent placement in shops, reviews in national press and serialisation in newspapers and magazines. They bring years of experience in cover design, production and sales, and your book will be worked on by a team of specialists – editorial, design, marketing, publicity and rights – each focused on their area.

Royalty rates vary but are commonly in the region of 7.5–10% on print sales. This is the cost of the support the publisher provides. At the contract stage, it is worth taking advice – the [Society of Authors](#) offers contract reviews to members.

The main downsides are time and selectivity. Large publishers are highly competitive and take on very few new authors each year. The submissions process, even with an agent, can take many months. Promotional support tends to be concentrated around publication, and authors are expected to take ongoing responsibility for building their own profile and audience.

Small and independent publishers

Smaller independent publishers are more likely to accept submissions directly from authors, without the need for an agent, compared to the bigger traditional publishers. They can also have a friendlier, less corporate feel than the larger houses. Many specialise in particular subject areas or audiences, so finding the right fit for you is important.

Royalty rates at smaller publishers are often similar to those offered by the larger houses, so it is worth weighing up carefully what a particular publisher can offer: their reach, their relationships with retailers and press, and their track record with comparable books.

Smaller publishers can be more vulnerable to changes in the market, such as mergers, closures or shifts in focus, so it is sensible to research the company's history and financial stability before signing.

2. HYBRID PUBLISHING

Hybrid publishing sits between traditional and self-publishing. You pay the publisher for production services – editing, design, typesetting, printing – but they handle distribution and you receive a royalty share that is typically higher than a traditional deal. You retain more creative control than you would with a traditional publisher, while benefiting from more professional support than going it entirely alone.

Quality varies considerably across hybrid publishers, so research is essential. Before signing anything, look for:

- clear, transparent pricing with no hidden costs
- verifiable distribution into mainstream bookshops and online retailers
- a genuine track record of producing well-reviewed, professionally presented books
- straightforward contract terms that give you ownership and control of your work.

It is also worth ensuring you have full access to your sales data – knowing how your book is selling is essential for making good marketing decisions. If a company is vague about how and when they will share this information, that is a red flag.

A quick online search for reviews and complaints about any hybrid publisher you are considering is always a good idea.

3. SELF-PUBLISHING

Self-publishing – sometimes called independent or indie publishing – means that you, as the author, manage and fund the entire process: editing, cover design, typesetting, printing and distribution. You keep full creative control, full ownership of your work and the full profit from every sale. You also carry all the costs and all the risk.

Self-publishing does not mean working alone. Most successful indie authors work with professional editors, cover designers and proofreaders, contracting each service as needed and choosing who they work with at every stage. The key advantage is control.

The main platforms for self-publishing in the UK are [Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing](#) (for ebooks and print-on-demand), [IngramSpark](#) (which gives broader access to bookshops and libraries), and services such as [Lulu](#) and [Draft2Digital](#). Print-on-demand technology means books are printed as orders come in, which removes the need for upfront print runs and warehouse costs, and makes it easy to correct errors or update content.

The most significant challenge for self-published authors is distribution and visibility. Getting books on to physical bookshop shelves is harder without a traditional publisher's trade relationships, and the discounts required by retailers can make the economics difficult on print-on-demand margins. Many successful indie non-fiction authors focus initially on selling direct to their audience – through their own website, at events or via Amazon – and build from there.

Self-publishing has become an increasingly credible route, particularly for non-fiction authors with an established platform and a clearly defined audience. Access to real-time sales data is an advantage too as it allows indie authors to test and refine their marketing approach quickly, without waiting for a publisher's quarterly report.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU DECIDE

If you are weighing up which route is right for you and your book, these questions are a useful starting point:

- What is your primary goal of publishing this book: income, profile, reaching a specific audience or something else?
- How important is it that your book appears in physical bookshops?
- How much time do you have to invest in marketing and promoting the book yourself?
- Do you have an existing audience or platform you can sell to directly?
- How much creative control do you want over the finished product?
- Are you writing the kind of book that a mainstream publisher is likely to want – and prepared for the time the submissions process takes?

It is also worth knowing that the routes are not mutually exclusive. A growing number of authors are published both traditionally and independently, and what suits one book may not suit the next. The most important thing is to keep learning about the industry and to stay actively involved in your book's life – however it is published.

If you're interested in the traditional route, but your proposal isn't quite there yet, I have some resources that might help [here](#).

Alternatively, if you want to self-publish, I offer manuscript reviews as well as developmental editing. Get in touch [here](#).