



Guide for Prospective Authors

by Michael Hackney

When a new author asks me how I think they should publish their book my reply may surprise them a little; “*Why* do you want to publish a book?” I’m not asking this to be impolite, it’s a legitimate question and a thought-out answer helps set expectations and reduce frustration and even failure. Once the bewilderment clears, I offer a simple analogy; “Would you ask a stranger ‘Which car should I buy?’ with no context? Of course not, you would first determine what type of vehicle you need, a practical mini van or pickup truck, a sports or luxury car, or a vehicle with great fuel economy. Armed with this information, you might ask that stranger ‘I have three young kids to shuttle around, which mini van do you recommend and why?’”

As an author, you owe it to yourself to understand what is driving you to publish your work. Even the publication medium (e.g. hardcover, paperback, E-book) is an important consideration for some authors. This Guide is intended to help lead you through an introspection process. Be honest, there are no right or wrong answers, the goal is for you to gain an understanding about what drives *your* desire to publish a book so you can make better decisions along the way. The following three questions are not intended to be all-inclusive but are designed to get you thinking about what’s important to you.

1. What are your motivations for publishing?

There are many reasons we *write* books; for some writing is personal, for others it might be a creative outlet. But *why publish*? You can be creative and keep it to yourself! Perhaps you expect a source of income from your creativity or you have a personal story that might help others. These are motivations for publishing, there are many others as you’ll see below. Don’t feel restricted by the list though, I continue to add to it and I’m sure it’s not exhaustive. I recommend writing your answers, don’t just mull them over in your head. It can be very helpful to review your list as you make decision throughout the process. And, of course, you can and should update it as you learn more.

- A. sharing your creativity – this includes the creative aspects of writing but also includes visual components like calligraphy, photography, drawing and painting. The drive to show the world your talent is strong and is often the most important consideration for authors I’ve mentored.
- B. satisfying your ego (fame and glory) – let’s face it, we all have egos that need some attention. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, in moderation. Authors that are motivated solely by ego are the exception rather than the norm, but there is nothing wrong with acknowledging your ego up front.
- C. sharing your passion – most of us are passionate about something and feel driven to share it.
- D. enhancing your career – writing on work-related topics can enhance your career, this is especially true in academic circles where the phrase “publish

- or perish” is quite literal. Sharing your knowledge or expertise makes you something of an expert and more valuable to your employer and colleagues.
- E. sharing your story – we all have stories to tell. Some are very personal, some are observations about the world around us. Think about who the intended audience is, for example:
 - i. family – are you only interested in sharing your story with your family?
 - ii. friends – this category is broader than “family” but still limits the audience to a close inner circle that know and respect or appreciate you.
 - iii. world – perhaps you have a story that might interest a broad demographic, people you don’t know you at all.
 - F. helping others overcome obstacles – if your story is personal, this could be a sub-category of “E” too but you may have insight to share even if you did not experience the obstacle personally.
 - G. to set the record straight – things change, mistakes need to be corrected. You might have research or knowledge that you believe changes the way we look at something.
 - H. to fill a void – perhaps little or nothing has been written about your topic and you want to fill that void.
 - I. income – are you motivated to write because you anticipate or need financial reward? There is nothing wrong with wanting to capitalize on your writing but understanding your financial expectations will help guide your decision making down stream. For instance, are you interested in a writing career or supplemental income?
 - J. immortality – for better or worse, humans have a finite time on planet earth. Readers many decades, even centuries, in the future might read your book and wonder about who you were and what you were like. To some authors, this is a strong motivator.

2. What are your thoughts on publishing mediums?

Do you have a strong opinion on *how* you would like your book brought into the world? Some authors are not satisfied with anything less than a physical medium like a hardcover or paperback book, whereas others are attracted to the near instantaneous distribution that an electronic book offers. Answers to this question help guide your thinking and evaluation of publishing options.

Hardcover books are the gold standard, but they are also the most expensive to produce. There is nothing quite like a hardcover book with your name on the cover sitting on the coffee table or on the bookshelf to say “I’ve written a book”! A similar, but perhaps lesser thrill, comes with a paperback book. Technology has enabled new electronic publishing options (like E-books) that are taking books to a completely new art form by incorporating multimedia and dynamic and ever-updated content.

Your choice of publishing medium may be impacted by your answer to the other two questions in this Guide. For instance, you can satisfy your ego and make supplemental income in a cost effective way by self publishing an E-book.

3. Do you want to be involved in the publishing process?

The publishing industry is changing rapidly. New technologies like low production run digital presses and electronic distribution offer many new and traditional options to get your book out to the world. Authors used to have to rely on publishing companies, with their financial and other resources, to publish their works. Today, authors can be involved in as much or little of the publishing process as they would like. Here are a few things to think about when considering the publishing process.

A. Traditional Publishers – traditional publishers are companies that provide all the necessary services and resources to bring your work to print. Publishers typically provide editing, graphic design, illustration and photography, layout, printing and binding, marketing and distribution. Rarely does a new author have much input into any stage of the process. Traditional publishers have many mouths to feed and each of those mouths will be fed before yours. Of course there are exceptions like up-front retainers, but new authors should have reasonable expectations - they are an “unknown” to the publisher until proven otherwise. Publishers are going to optimize for their business, not the author’s desire to get their book in print. It sounds harsh but it’s basic “Business 101”. As a new author, it will be more difficult to go this route but perseverance and patience may prevail if you have the desire to make it happen. Set a timeline for yourself or another goal like “15 rejections”. If you can’t find a publisher willing to take you on, then consider one of the other options presented below. You can always come back with your second book and try again.

B. Niche Publishers – Niche publishers are more flexible and willing to work with new authors. Niche publishers typically welcome author input, after all, the author is the expert in the subject matter and probably has some good input on potential buyers, book layout, binding and other publishing aspects. For instance my first book, *The Reelsmith’s Primer*, was a how-to book about hand-crafting fly fishing reels with simple tools. I knew from my own experience that readers would prefer a spiral bound book that lies flat on the workbench where the book will be used. My niche publisher was skeptical at first but I was able to convince them. We’ve since received hundreds of comments and emails from customers who appreciate the spiral binding! Niche publishers will usually have a deep understanding of your book’s intended market. This helps guide production runs, pricing and other important decisions where a traditional publisher may make (educated) guesses. There are trade-offs with a niche publisher. Extremely high production quality (hiring of graphic designers, very high end offset printing, etc) are usually not cost effective for a niche publisher. For instance, if your niche only has a market for several hundred books, it would not make financial sense to spend \$10,000 for graphic design and

layout to “get it perfect”. That is not to say that quality suffers, it’s more a matter of level of quality. In publishing, “quality costs”. Quantity also costs. Advancements in printing technology provide new opportunities for niche publishers to print low volumes (not print on demand) of high quality books very cost effectively. This removes a lot of the upfront risk associated with printing costs and inventory management. The bane of every publisher is unsold inventory. The new generation of publishers understand this and tailor their model to print what’s needed, when it’s needed.

- C. Self Publishing – Low cost photocopiers and digital printers provide opportunities for authors to publish themselves without requiring a lot of money up front. Self publishing has its pluses and minuses. For some authors, writing is all-important and the publishing process is a “black box” best left to professionals. For others, the opportunity to be involved in the publishing process is as rewarding and exciting as writing itself. It is important to ask yourself how involved you want to be in the actual production of your book. If you want to stay hands-off, then you should seek a publisher who will take on the financing and production of your book. If you are interested in taking on some of the production, perhaps layout and photography, but leave the printing and binding to others, there are new “self publishing” service options available today. These fall into a few categories that include publishers that offer services *à la carte*, allowing the author to be involved in as much or as little of the process as they choose. In this case, you take on the financial risk, management and scheduling aspects of your book and sub-contract jobs out as required. At the other end of the self publishing spectrum are Print on Demand services that allow authors to print a limited number of books to test the market or maybe even fulfill their desire to publish their book. For instance, if your primary motivation was to share your story with family (1.E.i. above), a dozen printed books will suffice. With Print on Demand, the expectation is that you, the author, have done all of the work required to prepare your book for print.
- D. E-book publishing – this option can be very inexpensive for both production and distribution. E-books might even be the best medium for your genre. Unfortunately, there are many different formats tied to proprietary E-book readers. Another downside is the potential for E-books to be (illegally) copied and distributed. Digital rights management (DRM) technology was developed to prevent illegal distribution. Apple and Amazon both integrate DRM into their electronic book stores and it is completely transparent to the reader. E-books offer new business models like “pay if you like it” or “pay if you can” since publication and distribution costs are very low.

Wrapping up

There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions but there are better answers than others for your personal situation. Authors today have many options to bring their work to fruition. Once you have a grasp on your personal motivations, how you would like to see your work published (physical, electronic or both), and how much of the publishing process you are able, willing or desire to take on, you will be much better prepared to make decisions as you bring your book into the world.