



# PUBLISHING FOR BEGINNERS

*What First-Time Authors  
Need to Know*

**BY LOURDES VENARD**

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Lourdes Venard

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Publishing for Beginners: What First-Time Authors Need to Know/ Lourdes Venard. – 2nd ed.

## **Dedication**

To my husband, Dave, who helps me reach my dreams.

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents	4
Preface	5
Chapter One: Indie or Traditional Publishing?	6
Case Study: Adventures in Self-Publishing	14
Chapter Two: Editing, Critiques, and Beta Readers	20
Case Study: The Importance of an Editor	28
Chapter Three: Preparing the Manuscript	30
Chapter Four: Querying Agents and Publishers	38
Chapter Five: Self-Publishing Basics	55
Chapter Six: Book Blurbs and Bios	65
Chapter Seven: Marketing	71
Chapter Eight: Personal Appearances	91
Chapter Nine: Financial Matters	96
Chapter Ten: Other Tech Considerations	105
Appendix: Other Resources	109
Acknowledgments	112
About the Author	113

## Preface

This book is not intended to impart writing advice. There are plenty of books that already do that. It is also not meant to be a comprehensive how-to on self-publishing; there are also books on that and I mention them later on. Rather, *Publishing for Beginners* was written specifically to help first-time authors who are unsure of their publishing path or are looking for very basic information. Four years after writing the first edition of this book, much has changed in the industry. I have also gathered more material from my clients and participated in their journeys. So what you are reading now is the updated and expanded second edition.

Over the years, as an editor for fiction and nonfiction books, I've received many questions that go beyond editing. The publishing landscape can be confusing for first-time authors: Should they self-publish or look for an agent? Where do they find agents? What is the best way to market their books? I've tried to answer these questions here. This is a compilation of research I've done, webinars I've watched, books I've read, conferences I've attended, and real-life examples from clients and other authors I know. I've included these "Case Studies" because, oftentimes, someone else's experience is the best way to learn.

This book is meant to be a start; I highly recommend you click on the links throughout. There is endless information on publishing; I've tried to cull some of it and present what I have found to be most helpful. You may also want to join online support groups for writers, where you can ask for advice and trade stories.

This book is written so you can dip in and out of chapters, depending on whether you are going the traditional route or indie publishing. I hope it helps you in your journey.

## Chapter One: Indie or Traditional Publishing?

The initial question many first-time authors ask themselves is whether they should self-publish (also called indie publishing) or look for an agent and/or publisher.

There is no right or wrong way, and the stigma that self-publishing once held has evaporated, especially with the huge successes of some indie authors. Self-publishing has nothing to do with quality; I've read self-published books that are far better than some traditionally published books. These days, self-publishing is a very valid choice.

Some indie authors have found phenomenal success. [Hugh Howey's](#) best-selling book, *Wool*, began as a short story, self-published through Kindle Direct Publishing. Readers clamored for more, and Howey continued writing his book in serial form. It did so well that Simon & Schuster purchased the rights to distribute it to bookstores and film rights were sold to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. [Jasinda Wilder](#) has self-published a number of steamy romance novels, selling more than a million ebooks and hitting No. 1 spots on Amazon and *The New York Times* Best Sellers list. In 2016, mystery writer Toby Neal [wrote](#) about how she had made a six-figure income and hit the *USA Today* best seller list with her last three titles.

There are definite successes out there. However, you should also be aware that there are more than 3 million books published each year. In 2016, a total of 786,935 International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) were assigned to self-published titles, according to Bowker, the official provider of ISBNs in the United States. But this number doesn't reflect the real number, and some experts say there may be many more self-published books. Many authors forego using ISBNs and only use the Amazon Standard Identification Number (ASIN).

Regardless of the real number, and whether you publish through traditional means or self-publish, you will have much competition. Your novel may very well be a heart-wrenching tale or a thrill-a-minute story, but you'll need more than that to compete in today's publishing sphere.

So do you publish traditionally or self-publish? These are some factors you'll want to take into consideration:

### **Traditional**

- It will be much easier for your books to appear in bookstores. Self-published authors may find it much harder (but not impossible) to get their books into big-name or even independent bookstores.
- There's the possibility of book reviews appearing in newspapers and online review sites, many of which won't review self-published books.
- You don't have to worry about cover design, formatting, getting an ISBN, and other steps involved in the publishing of a book. On the other hand, that means the choice of a cover design is usually out of your hands.
- You may receive a more thorough editing job. Big publishers normally employ three rounds of editing with different editors. Small publishers may have fewer. That said, I have still found errors in books put out by the Big Five publishers. (This used to be the Big Six, but consolidation has left us with only five large publishers: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster. Some people have even predicted it will be the Big One in a decade.)

- You may have some marketing and publicity help, although even traditionally published authors are left to do a great deal of their own promotion.
- You put less money into publishing initially, and you will get an advance (this advance is taken out of your sales; more on that later). With many small publishers, the advances may not be much. Best-selling author Brenda Hiatt spent years surveying authors and came up with ranges for advances. She detailed them in a [post](#) on her website.
- You get the satisfaction of saying your book has been picked by a publisher.
- Alas, it is more difficult to be traditionally published, although smaller or mid-sized publishing options are often a good fit for beginning authors (more on them later). Even if you have a wonderful story, publishers are looking for books that will sell in today's marketplace. Even if you get past the slush pile and an acquiring editor falls in love with your story, you still have to jump the hurdle of a P&L (profit and loss). Most publishers, even small publishers, will compile a P&L statement for every book they acquire. It looks at predicted sales (based on genre and similar books), past sales of an author, and costs associated with publishing the book. If your book doesn't meet a certain threshold, marketing and sales may nix it.
- And if you jump over all those hurdles—and are published, finally!—it doesn't mean a publisher will publish all forthcoming books from you, even if you are writing a series. Many authors are dropped after only two or three books because sales have been below what the publisher expected. This has happened even to well-known

authors. Publishing companies used to nurture authors and wait until the author developed a following—unfortunately, that is rarely the case now, especially with larger publishers.

## **Self-Publishing**

- Your book will come out much sooner. You don't need to find an agent (which can take years) and wait for the long publishing process (another year or two). You should, however, hire an editor, an interior formatter, and a cover designer if you want your book to look as professional as traditionally published books.

- You get a much larger share of the royalties and don't have to pay an agent (who takes 15 percent of your advance and royalties). This doesn't mean you'll necessarily make more money by self-publishing; that depends on how much marketing you do, your name recognition, and how well your book will sell. But some authors have found more financial success publishing on their own.

- You control the cover design and what's on the book's back jacket.
- You can set the price for your book, and you can run promotions (free or discounted prices) whenever you want.

- Self-publishing, however, may hurt you if you later want to be acquired by a traditional publisher, unless your books have very high sales and hundreds of five-star reviews. If you have lackluster or low sales, a publisher may see this as a negative. Some agents and publishers have even suggested to authors that they use a pen name if they have previously self-published.

- As stated above, you may have a harder time getting into bookstores or chain stores.
- Finally, while the stigma of self-publishing has lessened, there are some readers who look down on all self-published books as subpar.

## **Royalties**

Because this is a big issue in the traditional versus self-publishing discussion, I'd like to devote a few words to royalties. Traditional publishing royalties are low. For a trade paperback, it is about 7.5 percent generally, with ranges from 6 to 10 percent. For a mass-market paperback (the smaller-sized version of a paperback), it is about 8 percent. For a hardcover, it is 10 to 15 percent, and for an ebook, about 25 percent.

You don't start receiving royalties until your publisher has made back what they gave you for an advance. So, if you received \$10,000 as an advance, you won't start earning royalties until after the publisher has recouped that \$10,000. Most first-time authors can expect royalties of anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000; it's rare to receive above that unless you've self-published beforehand, with sales going through the roof. Most authors—70 percent, according to a *New York Times* essay—don't earn out their advances.

And what happens if your book doesn't make \$10,000 in sales? You still keep your advance, of course (since the publisher is paying the author only a percentage of sales, the publisher is still making money). But very low sales can affect the size of your next advance, or even whether the publisher will want to pick up your second book.

Now, if you are self-publishing, you can make up to 70 percent back in royalties. But, using the \$10,000 advance figure as an example, you will have to work very hard as a self-

publisher to make that much money on one book. The chapter on self-publishing goes into more detail on pricing.

### **Hybrid Author**

Whether you self-publish or go the traditional route, keep in mind that you can go back and forth between these two options. The “hybrid” author is one who straddles both traditional and self-publishing worlds. This can be an author who has been published traditionally and then, for whatever reasons, has decided to self-publish. It can also be a self-published author whose sales and reviews garner interest from traditional publishers or from Amazon Publishing’s [own imprints](#), who then pick up the author’s books, providing wider distribution and more marketing help. Many authors have one series through a traditional publisher but also self-publish another series on their own.

A hybrid author typically makes 10 to 20 percent more in income than authors who are either just traditionally published or self-published, according to statistics from the Digital Book World Conference.

Before deciding which path is best for you, you’ll have to ask yourself some hard questions. How important is it for you to have the validation of traditional publishing and to have your books in big-name bookstores? What are your goals in publishing? Do you need this to be an income-generating business? It helps to write down your goals before you make a decision.

Finally, be realistic. Many first-time authors go into publishing thinking they will make tons of money and get a Hollywood film deal out of their first book. There are certainly stories of this happening, but keep in mind that these authors might have spent years writing and

many have unpublished manuscripts—“practice” books that were written before their breakout book. Hugh Howey, mentioned above, had been writing (and publishing) for years before the success of *Wool*.

Also, there’s a good possibility you may not recoup the money you put into that first book if you are self-publishing. Many authors only begin to see profits after the second or third book, as they build their audience. Toby Neal says you will need five books minimum before you can see significant income.

Publishing is a business—a very tough, competitive business. According to Bowker, there are 3,500 books published *each day* in the United States! Traditional publishers only buy books they think will reach a wide audience, and they often drop authors not because of the literary quality, but because an author’s book did not reach commercial success, as deemed by the publishing house. It seems as if big publishers are moving away from supporting “midlist” authors—those who don’t bring in huge numbers but nonetheless have a loyal audience and solid numbers. I’ve seen many of these midlist authors turn to self-publishing. Authors are also having more success in small- to mid-sized publishing houses; there are at least four hundred such smaller publishers in the United States.

### **Small to Mid-size Publishers**

Many beginning authors get their start with smaller publishers, some of which take submissions directly from authors, not just agents.

You do want to do your research before approaching a smaller publisher. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do they publish the same types of book as the one you have written?

- Do they provide developmental editing, copyediting, and proofreading?

Some smaller publishers do not provide a comprehensive editing package.

- How well edited are the books? You may want to read a few of their books before signing on with any publisher. Keep in mind that all books have typos—but some have more than others.

- Are the covers and interiors professionally designed?

- Does the publisher provide marketing support? What type of marketing do they do? Do they send out review copies?

- Do they pay advances? What are their royalties? Some small publishers don't pay advances; this doesn't mean they are any less reputable. However, authors should *not* be paying for any services—this is vanity publishing, which is different from traditional publishing.

- When are royalties paid? How often will you get reports of sales?

- Where are the books distributed? Will your books appear in major and indie bookstores? Does your publisher get books into libraries? Which online distribution channels will be used?

- Will your book be a print book or only an ebook? Some small publishers only publish ebooks.

- What is the typical print run?

- Who is printing the book? Some small publishers use print on demand.

This is not bad in itself, except that some bookstores will not carry books printed by Kindle Direct Publishing (because Amazon is a competitor) and will only carry books printed through Ingram.

- Has the press been in business for a long time?
- What do authors published by this press say about the publisher? Don't be shy about reaching out to authors who have been published by the press.

As you step into the world of publishing, keep in mind that your journey may not be an easy one. But, if you have a passion for writing, it can be rewarding and fulfilling in many ways.

### **Case Study: Adventures in Self-Publishing**

Tracy L. Ward, one of my clients, has become successful as a self-published author of dark historical mysteries, but it was a rocky road at first. She wrote this account for me, and it offers great tips for first-time authors:

When I was halfway through my fifth novel attempt, *Chorus of the Dead*, I knew I finally had something worthy for others to read, not just my husband and close friends. There was something about this book that would appeal to the book-buying public. It had taken me twelve years and four previous, unpublished novels to reach that point, and because it was so personal I really dreaded sending it out into the traditional publishing world, where it could easily fall prey to red-ink happy editors and market-appeasing agents. I decided this book was mine, and mine alone. That's when I started to seriously look at self-publishing as an option.

My first task was to make sure I had the best possible book I could have, not an easy task for us artists riddled with self-doubt. It took me two years to write and revise *Chorus of the Dead*. Once I more or less decided that it was time to have someone else have a look at it I asked a friend to have a look. I now know that was a mistake. If I were to do it all over again I would be less inclined to hire a friend and I would have a few pointed questions for anyone I was interested in hiring. Questions such as: How long do you expect the process to take? What types of errors will you look for? Can you give me the names of published works that you have edited? Cost should only be a small part of the decision to hire a certain editor. Remember the saying, "You get what you pay for."

While my book was with my first editor I did research into self-publishing and realized it would take me a long, long time to generate the kind of readership that could sustain myself and my family financially. I noticed most of the writers who have been able to leave their day jobs had multiple (ten to twenty) novels published and figured it would take me just as long to make a reasonable living. So I set out to write a business plan, a general outline for my new publishing business that would guide me as I went along. I gave myself a target of four books. If I could write, edit, and finance four books to get me started I would have a better idea whether this self-publishing thing was worthwhile. If after four books I hadn't made my original investment back, then I would need to re-evaluate.

Part of my business plan included the financial nitty-gritty. I had done some internet searches for cover designers and found a WIDE price range for everything from stock covers for \$40 to custom covers of \$800 or more. I was lucky to find a talented cover designer who had created hundreds of covers that I could flip through on her website. Her style fell in line with

the brand I wanted to create and from there a beautiful business relationship was born. Since the first book she has been offering me regular discounts due to my “customer loyalty,” so the cost of each subsequent book has been decreasing. Her art has cost me \$600 to \$700, my second-largest expense for my book (first being editing). Cover art is so important. In fact, I would argue, next to an awesomely written book, the cover is your absolute best marketing tool.

In the end, my financial breakdown looked like this:

**Cover art:** \$600-\$800

**Editing:** \$500-\$900

**Ebook formatting:** \$100

**Marketing (business cards, bookmarks, etc.):** \$100

**Total:** \$2,000 or more for each title

The savings I have enjoyed from my cover artist has increased my marketing budget. Don't go crazy with marketing at first. Try every free avenue you can, like guest blogging for other writers, and setting up a Facebook page and Goodreads author page. Nothing sells the first book like another one, so the best use of your money and time is putting out another title.

In the end, I had to ask myself, can I commit to \$2,000 a year for the next four years in order to get this business off the ground? Without allowing my enthusiasm to cloud my judgment (much) I took the plunge and committed myself to making it work. As a stay-at home mom, I really wanted to make enough money—the equivalent of a part-time job—thinking a small income (maybe \$500 a month) would justify the number of hours I spend on my writing.

My income in the first year was almost nil. It was only after my second book came out that I began receiving regular checks from Amazon, etc. Eight months after my first book was released I sold four books in one month—that's not a typo, FOUR. The very next month I released *Dead Silent* under massive clouds of doubt. I honestly thought I would never see my \$4,000 investment again.

Sales increased, but each month I sold less than a hundred copies, certainly not enough to celebrate, especially after being in business for fifteen months.

And then a miracle happened. I was able to write a guest blog for *The New York Times* best-selling author Deanna Raybourn. She sent the call out in early September looking for writers to fill up her blog in the month of December so she could take the month off for Christmas. I offered an idea and she slotted me in—and all because I follow her on Facebook. I think this is an example of the old saying “Luck is preparation meets opportunity.” She's one of my favorite writers in the historical mystery genre and reading her Lady Julia Grey series sparked an idea in my mind to create Dr. Peter Ainsley and his dark Victorian world. Perhaps a bit of flattery helped, too.

After that piece appeared on her website, sales for *Dead Silent* grew, and *Chorus of the Dead* got a second wind. Suddenly, my books were showing up in people's recommendations on Amazon's site and that led to increasing sales. After eighteen months in the business I had made my money back on both books and was able to set aside a little money for the next one, due out in six months. It was miraculous and completely unexpected. And then, just when I thought I had reached a ceiling (considering I only had two books out), something happened and books sales spiked again (don't ask me how, because in truth I have no idea what brought

about this surge in sales). Suddenly, I was reaching benchmarks (100/200/300+ books sold in one month) and my books landed on Amazon's Top 100 for Kindle-Mystery-Thrillers-Historicals.

When my third book, *The Dead among Us*, was released in May 2014, I made my money back on that title within the month. Now all three of my books bob around Kindle's Top 100 for Mystery-Thrillers-Historicals and each week sales increase slowly but steadily.

I have never done Kirkus reviews, or BookBub, although I might now that my third novel is out. I entered the *Writer's Digest* Self-published Book of the Year award and received some great feedback regarding *Chorus of the Dead*, but I didn't win so I don't think I received any free publicity through that contest. I did an inexpensive ad with The Cheap Ebook, a Facebook page (\$15) but didn't notice any marked spike in sales. I have also done promotions with Goodreads (\$50) and Goodreads giveaways, which got myself on a lot of "to read" lists. In this case, I think the giveaways are much more helpful than the paid ads.

I never give my books away for free. I had one romance novella on Amazon's KDP Select program, thinking it would promote me as a writer. There were 700 free downloads, which only resulted in one one-star review. The main reason the reviewer didn't like it? My characters had sex! Gasp. I assume all the others who downloaded it never bothered to read it.

Publishing is a risky business. I would argue self-publishing even more so. But the risk has been entirely mine and so the rewards are for me to reap alone. I do not share my profits with a publishing house or agent. I retain control over my creative work, my brand, and my business. Had I not stuck with it, slogged through the iffy times, I would not be in the position I am today. My income, although not as much as I made as a journalist, is enough for me at this point in my life. It exceeds my original wish of making \$500 a month and that is enough to keep

me coming back to my keyboard to write each day. I become giddy when I think about how far my career has come in the last two years, but this elation is tempered by the reality that I am only as good as my next book. If I sit back and put my feet up now I may lose momentum. That is why I keep writing. I have one more book to produce in order to reach my original goal of four, but I think I already have enough evidence to show that this is the business for me. I can't imagine doing anything else.

Note: Since writing the above, Ward now has seven titles in her series and has published the first book in a second series.

### **Further Reading**

If you are a beginning author, I strongly recommend you subscribe to [Writer's Digest](#) and [Poets & Writers](#). Especially helpful back issues are the November/December issue of *P&W* and the February 2014 issue of *Writer's Digest*; both of these issues focus on self-publishing versus traditional publishing.

## Chapter Two: Editing, Critiques, and Beta Readers

Whether you are self-publishing or sending your manuscript out to agents and small publishers, hiring an editor is a highly recommended step. You want your manuscript to be as polished as possible, and that's where another set of eyes—someone with experience—can be beneficial.

However, many beginning writers don't understand the different levels of editing, or even the terminology. This may get you less than you had hoped for, if the level of editing is not spelled out in a contract, letter of agreement, or email.

To help writers understand the differences, below is a primer on those different levels and what else you should know when working with an editor.

Your first decision should be how much editing you want. Below are three services you may need:

### **Developmental Editing** (also called substantive editing or content editing)

In traditional publishing, this is the first round of editing, and it may reshape your manuscript quite a bit. Not all writers feel they need this; you may have workshopped your manuscript, or gone through several rounds of critiques and beta readers. Maybe you feel your manuscript doesn't need further work.

However, if you are sending out your manuscript and not getting the feedback you had hoped for, an editor may help you rework your manuscript.

Substantive editing will look at:

- Plot structure
- Character development and voice
- Story pacing
- Scene structure
- Flow of the story
- Point of view and dialogue
- Gaps in the story
- Themes and appropriateness of genre
- Clumsy or awkward writing
- Overuse of passive writing
- Convoluted sentence structure

This type of editing may include an editorial letter, a critique that covers these “big-picture” issues. Some developmental editors may provide only the edit letter and no further work. Other editors work in a more collaborative manner, going back and forth with the writer to polish the manuscript. Make sure you know beforehand what you’ll be getting.

### **Copyediting**

This includes looking at:

- Grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and word usage
- Consistency in names, the timeline, and other details
- Consistency in dialogue and point of view narration
- Glaring factual errors, as well as fictional ones (if you’ve established

something as fact in Chapter 1, it should remain the same throughout)

- Repetitiveness
- Other style issues (such as when to italicize words or how to use

quotation marks), as spelled out by *The Chicago Manual of Style* or another style guide.

Some copyeditors may also point out big-picture issues or awkward writing, but don't expect this unless the editor has agreed to it.

## **Proofreading**

Do not confuse proofreading with copyediting or use the terms interchangeably.

Generally, proofreaders are employed by publishers to read the story in typeset form, to look for any remaining errors in spelling, punctuation, or typesetting. For the most part, proofreaders only look for glaring errors. Even the very best copyeditor won't catch every single error, and another set of eyes does help.

If you ask a professional editor for proofreading, she will likely expect to read a book that has already been edited and formatted for publishing.

## **Finding an Editor**

So, how do you find an editor, and how do you go about hiring one?

One of the best ways of finding a copyeditor is to ask for references from other writers. There's also a very large pool of talent at the [Editorial Freelancers Association](#). A posting there will generate dozens of applicants. Some regions may have their own groups, such as the [Bay Area Editors' Forum](#) in San Francisco, the [Editors' Association of Canada](#), and the [Society for Editors and Proofreaders](#) in the United Kingdom. You may also want to try [Reedsy.com](#), an international platform which vets its editors and cover designers.

Once you have a pool of applicants, the best way to winnow the selection is to ask them to complete a sample edit (anywhere from six to twelve pages). This is probably the most important step you can take. It will give you an idea of their editing strengths and, just as importantly, their bedside manner. Most editing inherently feels like criticism, and you'll be reading page after page of this, so make sure you understand (and can stand) an editor's comments.

A sample edit of this length is also enough to give the editor an idea of how long it will take them to complete the project, and they can base a price estimate on this. You can find common copyediting rates at <https://www.the-efa.org/rates>, although individual rates vary considerably.

When you do find an editor, make sure you agree on the level of editing, financial terms, amount of revisions you are allowed, and an exit plan (should you become unhappy with the work being done). Make sure this is spelled out either in a contract or, at the very least, in an email exchange.

Editors also vary on the way they like to be paid. Some editors ask for a deposit, a second or even a third payment later on, and then a final payment. Other editors will charge you weekly, or as they finish sections of the book. Make sure all this is spelled out in advance in a contract.

Here are other important questions for you to ask:

- When can you start my project, and how soon can you complete it?

Editors often juggle several projects at once, so if you need it soon, make sure you say so up front. Be careful, though, of an editor who promises to edit your manuscript much

more quickly than the other editors you've contacted. Editing, by nature, is a slow, methodical process. Editors who rush or do only one pass will miss errors.

- What is your experience editing books, especially in my genre?
- Do you have at least three references I can contact? (Some editors put testimonials on their site, and this works well in lieu of references.)
- What is your editing method? Most editors will edit a manuscript in a Microsoft Word document, using the Track Changes feature. There are some editors who will accept a hard copy of a manuscript, but most prefer to work with a Word document.
- How do you prefer to communicate if I have questions? If the editor only wants to communicate via email and you have questions or concerns you want to address in a phone call or in person, this could create problems down the line.
- Do you provide a contract or letter of agreement? This protects both you and the editor. The contract should spell out rates, timelines, the length of the manuscript, and the type of editing (substantive versus copyediting).
- Do you provide other services? If you are happy with your editor, the relationship may continue, with the editor reviewing letters to agents/publishers, editing your blog posts or website, etc.

### **Maintaining a Good Relationship with Your Editor**

The next step, after determining what type of editor you want and hiring someone, is to maintain that relationship—and make the most of it. If the two of you are a good fit, this is a relationship that may potentially continue for many years—throughout more books, short

stories, magazine articles, websites, or blog posts. The secret of maintaining a long-lasting relationship is like maintaining many other working relationships. Communicating clearly and with respect goes a long way.

Here are some other tips:

- Be honest and upfront. Before you hand over the manuscript, make sure the editor knows what you expect. Do you want in-depth, substantive editing, or just light copyediting? Will you need fact-checking?
- Get your manuscript in on time. The editor probably has other work, and has scheduled their time accordingly. If you tell them you'll have your manuscript (or a number of chapters) to them on a set date, try to meet your deadline.
- Pay on time. For many editors, this is their full-time job and timely payment is critical.
- Don't argue over an edit—or, at least, do it politely. If you don't understand why an editor changed something, ask. If they misunderstood something in the text, it's likely that readers also will misunderstand. There may be other reasons for the change. And if you still disagree, well, you have the last word anyway.
- Don't expect more beyond the editing services. An editor cannot guarantee you publication, and don't expect them to have an "in" with agents or publishers, although they may point you to websites and professional directories that are helpful. If you have a good working relationship, you may find editors who will go beyond what's required and send you updates about writing contests, conferences in your area, or other useful advice they come across.

- Finally, say thanks. A simple, but often overlooked, step. Editors, working behind the scenes, will always appreciate this. If you've really enjoyed the process, you can even volunteer a testimonial or offer to be a reference for the next client.

### **Critiques and Beta Readers**

Several authors have asked me whether they should have beta readers, or whether they should be part of critique groups. This is a personal decision; I've heard some negative stories about critique groups and beta readers, while other authors say comments from readers have been invaluable and changed the direction of the plot.

If you do give your manuscript to others, make sure you do so before the editing process. The editor should have the very last version of your manuscript; making change after change afterward can introduce more errors and drive up the price of editing.

Critique groups and beta readers differ in that you usually give chapters to a critique group while you are still writing your WIP (work in progress). A beta reader, however, will look at an initial, but complete, draft. Your beta reader should be a trusted person who won't be afraid to be honest about your work. It doesn't have to be a professional, but it should be someone who is well-read in the genre in which you write. If you have a librarian friend, tap them!

How many beta readers should you have? Anecdotal evidence tells me three to five is the best number. More than that and you may be overwhelmed (unless you have a lot of time to go through comments). Make sure you give your beta readers a deadline to meet. Ask them to look at big-picture issues (not grammar and spelling): Are your characters and their actions believable? What do they like and dislike about the characters? Did the story hold their

attention? If not, why? Were there any twists they saw coming? Any sections they found confusing or weak? You may want to provide them with a checklist form that addresses your concerns.

If you can't find any beta readers, there are professional beta readers who, for a small fee, will read and comment on your novel. A Google search will turn some up (or ask me—I have recommendations).

Do you need to incorporate all the beta readers' suggestions and ideas? No, certainly not. It's your book, in the end. But if more than one person makes the same suggestion, you should probably consider making a change.

### **Revising Your Work**

I do not recommend self-editing. Even professional editors employ other editors to look at their own work. It's very hard to catch your own mistakes. And even asking someone who is good at grammar, such as an English teacher, is not the same as hiring a professional editor, who will look at much more than just grammar and spelling, and who has training and experience in manuscript editing.

However, there are some books, which I list below, that help you during the revision process. There's also this [post](#) on the tools that some editors use.

Another great help for many authors has been to read their manuscript into a tape recorder (your cell phone may already have a recorder), and then replay the recording. There are also computer programs that will read the printed word, although I've found most to lack a natural reading voice. Even just the act of reading your manuscript aloud helps. You'll catch many errors this way, as well as get a feel as to whether your dialogue sounds realistic, your

sentences are too long (or too short), and whether the reader will stumble at any awkward phrasing.

Finally, do not rely on friends or beta readers to fix all your mistakes (although they may catch some). As literary agent Janet Reid has said, “Beta readers are NOT editors. Editors help you fix things. Readers tell you if you’ve got things that need fixing.”

### **Case Study: The Importance of an Editor**

Toby Speed, a published children’s author, spent fifteen years crafting her first mystery novel and another year shopping it around to agents and publishers.

“After many revisions and a couple of overhauls, at 101,600 words it was perfect,” she said. “I’d had two groups of beta readers go through it carefully and I incorporated their helpful, detailed comments.”

But Speed’s mystery story was going nowhere until one acquiring editor wrote back, explaining the importance of pacing and suggesting a cut of 15,000 to 20,000 words—and, best yet, the editor had shown her how, by editing the first seventy pages. But, at first, this only annoyed Speed.

“She had even deleted my prologue, the best writing in the book!” Speed said. “I walked around grumbling for twenty-four hours, wondering how I could possibly cut that many words without harming the story. Then I read the editor’s version with the tracking turned off. It read really well—in fact, a whole lot better than the original. The story got started right away and moved right along. The first two chapters ended in the right place. I took a deep breath and over the next six weeks, following her example, I shaved nearly 16,000 words from the story and resubmitted it.

“No one else had seen my story as it was—or as it had the potential to become.”

Speed resubmitted her manuscript, and *Death Over Easy* was published by a well-respected crime fiction imprint.

### **Further Reading**

*Revision & Self-Editing* by James Scott Bell

*The Artful Edit: On the Practice of Editing Yourself* by Susan Bell

*Don't Sabotage Your Submission: Save Your Manuscript from Turning Up D.O.A.* by Chris

Roerden

## Chapter Three: Preparing the Manuscript

There's one facet of submitting a manuscript that beginning writers often get wrong—and it has nothing to do with good grammar, appropriate pacing, or realistic characters. It is, simply, formatting a manuscript properly. This is such an important part of the process that literary agent Noah Lukeman tackles that first in his book *The First Five Pages*. Careless presentation can mean the writing is also careless, he writes, and a literary agent may not get beyond sloppy formatting.

Doug Grad, of the Doug Grad Literary Agency, also echoes this on his website. "It always amazed me as an editor how many agents would send me single-spaced submissions, or submissions with no page numbers. To me, it was the height of laziness. Editors are notoriously overburdened with reading—make it easy on them to keep track of what they're reading, and you might have an easier time making the sale. At least they won't throw it down in disgust and say 'I can't read that—it's single-spaced!'"

Bad formatting will give agents and publishers an instant reason to discard your novel. The Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency says on its website: "We really do read and enjoy your submissions, but it makes it difficult to determine whether you're an ideal candidate for representation when we receive incomplete submissions. Likewise, the more time we spend opening giant attachments, deconstructing your elaborately wrapped submission, or squinting at your poorly formatted sample material, means less time to actually consider the thing that matters: your story."

You should always check an agent or publisher's website first for any formatting advice, but the following is based on general industry standards.

**Formatting: The basics and first few pages**

This is what most agents want to see:

- 1) Manuscripts should be in a Microsoft Word document, unless otherwise specified.
- 2) A manuscript should be set in 12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced, with one-inch margins all the way around. It should be left-justified (meaning the right side will be ragged, or uneven).
- 3) The very first page of your manuscript should be a title page, with your name, address, phone number, and email address on the upper left-hand corner (single-spaced). The word count (it can be rounded to the nearest thousand) can be on the upper right-hand corner or below the title and author's name.

The title itself should be centered, midway down this same page. The author's name should be underneath.

So your centered title would look like this:

My Best Novel

By Lourdes Venard

90,000 words

- 4) Your title page will not have a page number. Begin numbering pages on the first page of your story.

5) All the pages should have a header and footer. The header should show the title and author. You can separate them with a slash: Venard/My Best Novel. It's easiest to put the page numbers in the footer, although it's also acceptable to put it in the header.

### **Ten more formatting issues**

Here are other formatting issues you should know. Some of these are helpful even if you are self-publishing.

1) Use only a single space, not double spaces, between sentences. The double space rule is a holdover from the days when we used typewriters. Proportional computer fonts have eliminated the need for double spaces. You can quickly change this with the Find and Replace function under the Home tab. Hit the space bar twice in the Find bar and once in the Replace bar. Then click on "Replace all."

2) Do not repeatedly strike the paragraph key to create a new chapter on the next page. Instead, to create a new page for the next chapter, go to the Insert tab, where you can hit Page Break. You can do this while you are writing the manuscript or once you have finished. Just place your cursor at the end of the last sentence in a chapter.

3) Skip the Table of Contents in an unpublished manuscript. Many beginning authors feel they need a numbered TOC. But Word pages do not equal pages formatted for either a print book or ebook. If you want to include a TOC you can, but don't assign numbers to the chapters at this point.

4) Make sure all the chapter headings are consistent. They should start at least a line or two down the page. Some guidelines call for starting a chapter one-third down the page. In

books, the start of a chapter is usually not indented. You can do this for a manuscript, but it is not necessary at this point in the process.

5) Indent your paragraphs by 0.5. Do not use the tab key or hit the space bar to indent paragraphs. On the Home tab of your Word ribbon, go to the Paragraph tab and click on the little arrow on the bottom right-hand corner. This will open up a dialogue box that will let you indent paragraphs, as well as double space your manuscript. You can hit Ctrl/A to highlight your entire manuscript, and then you can set the paragraphs all at once.

6) Don't use a paragraph key for indenting an entire passage or at the end of a line. Doing otherwise creates more work later for a formatter or editor. If you need to indent an entire passage, do so by using the Paragraph tab on the Word ribbon. Two little arrows on that tab allow you to increase or decrease the indent.

7) Don't worry about getting fancy with scene breaks. You can show scene breaks with three asterisks or three hashtags (#) on a single line. (Note: Using asterisks sometimes creates a strange divided line across the page that is then hard to get rid of.) An interior book designer will format scene breaks once your book is ready to publish.

8) Avoid writing words in all capital letters for emphasis. Instead, *Chicago* recommends italicizing such words. Example: "Well, you are so *very* wrong!"

9) Keep the manuscript in one file, unless an agent asks otherwise. You certainly don't want to send thirty files—one for each chapter. It's too much work for any agent to have to open file after file.

10) Make sure to type "The End" at the end of the manuscript. You want agents and publishers to know that is indeed the end!

## Formatting dialogue

Some of these may seem obvious, but I see these basic mistakes when it comes to formatting dialogue. For an agent, this screams “inexperienced writer!”

1) Unless you are writing in the British style, enclose all dialogue within double quotation marks. Only use single quotation marks within double quote marks. Example: “What exactly did he mean when he said he would be ‘on time’?” I asked. (For British style, it is the opposite, but I won’t get into that here.)

2) Punctuation marks go inside the quotation marks, with dialogue tags (he said/she said) outside the quote. Note that the “he said” or “she said” are lowercased. Example: “We’re all going out to dinner now,” he said. You would only capitalize he/she said at the beginning of a sentence. Example: She said, “We all going out to dinner.”

3) An action that is not a dialogue tag would be uppercased. “I could never do that.” She shook her head at him in disgust.

4) If speech is interrupted or there is an abrupt change in speech, use an em dash; if speech trails off at the end of a sentence, use an ellipsis. Ellipses can also be used “to suggest faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion or insecurity,” according to *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Em dash examples from *Chicago*:

“Will he—can he—obtain the necessary signatures?” asked Mill.

“Well, I don’t know,” I began tentatively. “I thought I might—”

“Might what?” she demanded.

As for faltering speech, *Chicago* gives this example: “I . . . I . . . that is, we . . .  
yes, we have made an awful blunder!”

Caution: Don’t overuse ellipses in your manuscript. They can really stick out if used often, quickly becoming an annoying visual tic.

5) If the break belongs to the surrounding sentence rather than to the quoted material, *Chicago* says the em dashes should appear outside the quotation marks, as:

“Someday he’s going to hit one of those long shots, and”—his voice turned huffy—“I won’t be there to see it.”

6) Every time you switch a speaker, start the dialogue on a new line. Just like with any other paragraph, you would indent it.

7) If you break up a line of dialogue that is all part of the same sentence, lowercase the second half. Example: “I won’t go to dinner,” she said, “with that obnoxious man.”

8) While I don’t recommend this, if you have a very long speech from one character, you can break it up into several paragraphs. The start of each paragraph must have a beginning quotation mark. However, there is only one ending quotation mark—at the very end of the final paragraph.

Preparing your manuscript to be read by an editor, agent, or publishing house is different from formatting it if you are self-publishing. For more information on that, please read the chapter on self-publishing.

## **Scrivener**

Many authors use this writing program. Those who love it sing its praises. It can be useful in writing scenes, keeping research at hand, and even formatting an ebook. But many

writers find the program frustrating and difficult to use. Therefore, I neither recommend nor discourage the program. There's a 30-day trial version, so you may want to try it out before buying it.

## **Word Lengths**

Now, let's talk about word lengths. There are some rules here. Yes, some authors break the rules, but these are mostly established authors and publishing houses know these writers will draw readers. Stephen King, for example, can get away with this; his books have sold millions of copies. If your name is not Stephen King, you may want to follow the word counts suggested by Chuck Sambuchino of *Writer's Digest*:

Below 70,000:	Too short
80,000 – 89,999:	Totally cool
90,000 – 99,999:	Generally safe
70,000 – 79,999:	Might be too short; probably all right
100,000 – 109,999:	Might be too long; probably all right
110,000 or above	Too long

There are some exceptions. Science fiction/fantasy can be in the 100,000- to 115,000-word range.

And even within a genre, such as crime fiction, word counts can vary. Cozies, for example, generally run between 50,000 and 90,000 words. Thrillers, meanwhile, run 80,000 to 120,000 words. Different publishers have very specific numbers for word counts, so thoroughly research before you query.

Many beginning novelists write either too short or too long. These can be automatic reasons for dismissal. Says well-known agent Barbara Poelle: “When I see a word count below 60,000, I wonder what is going on with the B storyline or supporting characters.” Anything above 130,000 also makes her nervous, since it may signal that “you are afraid to kill your darlings or you overwrite. With a debut, you want to target the middle of the bull’s-eye.”

Award-winning suspense novelist Jenny Milchman, in an interview, told me that her very first novel came in at 180,000 words. She said that when she sent this “behemoth” of a novel out to agents, one agent wrote back a letter filled with dense feedback. It helped her see what was wrong with her novel and, two weeks after cutting 60,000 words from it, she was offered representation.

It is very tough to “kill your darlings,” as William Faulkner famously said, but agents (and even readers) may be put off by such long novels. If your novel is too long, consider having an editor make suggestions on where to cut. Or perhaps you can break up the story into a trilogy. Aside from turning off readers, a longer novel will cost significantly more to edit, format, and print.

## Chapter Four: Querying Agents and Publishers

If you are not self-publishing, then you will be querying agents and possibly small publishers (most large publishers do not accept unagented manuscripts). This chapter will address how best to query agents, with some samples of winning queries and synopses.

Many agents and publishers won't even read your sample chapters. They are inundated with queries, so your query letter and synopsis have to really grab them and give them a reason to read your chapters. Make sure your query is as polished as it can be.

### **Agents**

If you are traditionally publishing, you will need an agent—maybe. Many authors publish through smaller publishing houses without need of an agent. Agents today wear many hats. Some agents read manuscripts and act almost as editors, suggesting changes based on their experience and knowledge of what publishers seek. An agent, though, is most important in handling your contract and the rights to your work, whether it be print, audio, or foreign books. For their work, an agent typically takes 15 percent of an author's advance.

You want an agent that will be passionate about your work, one who will be a cheerleader. One client found an agent, but after a year of no progress, he began questioning his agent. He found out his agent had never even read the entire manuscript; instead, only the agent's wife had read the entire manuscript! Needless to say, my client dropped his agent.

Are agents worth it? Polls have suggested they are, with agented writers making more money. However, agents are very selective in taking on clients. An established agent may only

take on one to four new writers a year; newer agents are building their client list and take on more—but they may not have as many connections in the industry. The BookEnds Literary Agency keeps some eye-opening [statistics on its website](#) as to how many queries they receive—and how few new clients they take on each month.

On the other hand, there are many stories of well-known authors querying hundreds of agents and publishers. James Lee Burke, author of thirty-three novels, was rejected 111 times over nine years when he queried with *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*. When it was finally published by Louisiana State University Press in 1986, it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Sara Gruen, author of the best-selling *Water for Elephants*, sent out 129 query letters for an earlier novel, *Riding Lessons*. This novel was no slouch either—it went on to sell several hundred thousand copies, according to her agent, Emma Sweeney. And Kathryn Stockett has written that she received sixty rejections for *The Help*, which went on to become a best seller—and a movie.

Where do you find agents? I recommend [QueryTracker.net](#). There's a free version, but the paid version, which is very inexpensive, allows you to track how fast agents respond and what others authors have commented. [Publishers Marketplace](#) also allows you to search for agents. It's also a site that authors can check each day for up-to-date publishing news. Again, there's a free version and a paid version. For \$25 a month, you can see new deals on a daily basis, analyze an agent's deal history, and much more. Manuscript Wish List, at [www.manuscriptwishlist.com](http://www.manuscriptwishlist.com) has up-to-date information on agents and what they hope to see in their inboxes. The Manuscript Wish List is also lively on Twitter; do a hashtag search for #MSWL. It's also a good idea to follow those agents accepting manuscripts in your genre.

And, of course, you can meet agents at writers' conferences and other book events. The personal connection is important. These face-to-face meetings often result in the agent asking for at least a partial manuscript.

And what do you do if you get a nibble from an agent, or an agent says she is interested in representing you? Before saying yes, you and the agent must have a conversation. You'll want to ask her some questions; for example, you'll want to know how the agent plans to market your book and how many publishers she will submit to at one time. This is a very informative [article](#) at AgentQuery on what to do and what to ask if an agent is interested.

### **The Basics of Querying**

Before you even begin querying, make sure your manuscript is complete. And by that, I mean that you have had it edited (hopefully by a professional) and have sent it out to beta readers. You can, of course, make changes later, based on any feedback from agents. But you should not query with anything but your best. And never, ever query with an unfinished manuscript—or even with a first draft. You only get one chance to impress, and you're competing against a pile of other manuscripts.

It's been recommended that you query six to eight agents at a time. If your query is weak, you'll find out soon enough—no one will ask for more chapters. At that point, it's time to rework your query, then send out the next six to eight. If you begin to get requests for partial manuscripts—but not full manuscripts—then this likely means that it is the manuscript, and not the query, that needs more work. It could also mean you're sending your manuscript to the wrong agents. If you haven't had your manuscript critiqued yet, you may want to do so before continuing to query.

After the initial queries are sent out, begin adding independent publishers and entering your manuscripts into any appropriate contests. There's a good list of independent publishers [here](#). Your advance will be smaller with these independent publishers, but you likely will have a better chance of being accepted. Many of these smaller publishers have a good reputation, especially in genre publishing, and their books are reviewed by magazines and review websites that focus on that genre. As for contests, subscribe to [Poets & Writers](#), which features a listing of contests.

Before querying, make sure you research each agent to make sure your manuscript is comparable to what he or she has been selling. You may be writing a mystery, but within the genre there are dozens of subgenres—thriller, cozy, historical, psychological mystery, etc. Agents and small publishers may lean toward one subgenre.

While querying, make sure you follow the submission guidelines for each agent or publisher (almost always available on their website). Submission guidelines vary widely, and if you veer from the preferred submission process, your submission may never be read. At one conference, a publisher bluntly said, "If you are sending something that follows someone else's submission guidelines, we will throw your submission in the trash."

Finally, make sure that your query, as well as synopsis, has also been edited and is free of typos and glaring grammatical errors.

### **Writing the Query**

Many writers struggle with writing the query and synopsis. Your query should be simple and follow a somewhat standard format: It should open with why you are querying this agent, the number of words in your manuscript, the title of your book (in capital letters), and "the

hook.” The hook is one sentence that explains what your book is about; it should be written in a way that will grab the reader. Some people also call the “hook” the logline; this [post](#) goes more in depth into what makes for a good logline.

Agent Barbara Poelle has a formula she calls “hook, book, and the cook.”

The “hook,” she says, should be something that grabs the reader. For example: “Great white shark terrorizes small New England town” (*Jaws*).

The “book” is another five or six succinct lines about the manuscript. The “cook” is the author and should answer three questions: Why this book, why me, why now? The “why now” is a good place to share comp titles—other published books that are most like yours. The “why me” is any writing or publishing experience you may have, or (for nonfiction writers) any expertise in the matter.

Don’t try to pad your bio with additional information that is not germane to what you’ve written. If you have written or are writing a second book as a series, mention it here, but don’t necessarily call attention to the fact that this is your first book.

Finally, you will have a closer—thank the agent for her time and consideration, and let her know your full manuscript is available upon request.

Other do’s and don’ts when querying, from Barbara Poelle:

- If guidelines say you can send your first ten pages, don’t send more than requested (eleven pages may be OK if it’s a natural breaking point, but not many more).
- Don’t send photos of yourself.
- Don’t start off a query letter by asking a ludicrous question.
- Don’t use offensive language or racial slurs.

- Don't use exclamation points.
- Don't say this is the next Agatha (crime fiction award) winner.
- Don't call the office to check on your query.
- Don't open with a pithy comment. Be professional in your letter.

### **Submission Guidelines**

You should, of course, research the agent or publisher to whom you are submitting, since each agency has different rules.

Most agents no longer accept paper submissions, so you must know how to properly submit your queries and manuscripts through email. Many agencies ask you to submit through an online contact form on their website; this usually is very straightforward, a matter of copying and pasting what they need into form boxes.

If they don't have an online form, then your query should go in the body of an email, not as a separate attachment. A synopsis and first five pages of a manuscript may also be included in the body of the email—but only if the agent or publishing house states that this is acceptable. Many agents only want a query.

If the submission guidelines say to send five pages, send only five pages (five and a half may be acceptable if this is a natural breaking point, but don't send much more than that).

After you submit, settle in for a long wait—up to twelve weeks. Some agents will never respond unless interested (you may feel it is rude, but an agent gets hundreds of queries a month and simply doesn't have the time). Even an agent who has asked for a partial or full manuscript may take a while. Many agents have commented on how irritating it is to get follow-up emails, so be patient.

### **More Don'ts**

Use spell check, but don't rely on it. Spell check doesn't catch the use of a wrong word ("pole" for "poll," for instance). If possible, have someone else read your query and synopsis.

Don't use exclamation points. For some agents, they are an automatic strike. Your writing should be strong enough to carry any sentiment.

Don't use a quirky email address if you want to be taken seriously. You may want to use a dedicated email address for all your writing business.

Do not simultaneously query two or more agents at the same agency. Some agencies allow you to query another agent after the first one has passed on the manuscript, while other agencies frown upon this. Usually, this is indicated on the agency website. Don't query an agent a second time unless you have rewritten substantially or the agent has asked you to resubmit after changes.

If you meet an agent at a conference and she asks for a submission, don't delay too much. As one agency says on their website, what they are seeking now won't be the same as what they are seeking in six months. Remind the agent that you met her at a conference and that she asked for your submission. Remember, agents deal with hundreds of names a month, so it's good to jog their memories.

### **Some do's**

Because this may be your only chance at an agency, make sure that the query not only has the needed information, but captures your voice. This may be the only indication an agent will have of your writing ability.

Make sure you know your market and what is of commercial appeal right now. This is where you can add comps and let the agents know what type of reader would enjoy your book. Also, you look more professional if you have read widely in your genre.

Make sure you know the word counts for your genre and subgenre. If you've written a 100,000-word cozy, you are not likely to receive requests for a partial or full. This signals to agents that the manuscript is likely bloated and the writer reluctant to trim.

In all queries, it is important to show the inciting incident—that turning point that draws the protagonist into the investigation.

The logline, other than being a catchy one-sentence phrase, should also show the protagonist and her goal. Make sure you describe the protagonist—not with physical attributes, but rather with what sets her apart. The goal is what drives the character.

### **Writing the Synopsis**

I've heard many agents say they only read a synopsis if they are hooked on the first chapters. But it's still important. An agent looks at the synopsis to see what potential pitfalls the manuscript may have, such as a lack of red herrings or little motivation for an amateur sleuth to risk her life. Agents also use the synopsis to sell the book both within their own agency and outside—to acquisition editors. Of course, by that point, an agent may help you rewrite a weak synopsis if she loves the story—but why take a chance?

Jessica Faust, of BookEnds Literary Agency, wrote in one blog post that “a synopsis can make or break your ability to get a book deal. Numerous times I've received rejection letters from editors who were basing their feedback on the synopsis, because, quite simply, what they were commenting on wasn't even in the chapters we submitted.”

## **Length and formatting**

Now, this is tricky. There is very little instruction on many websites. Most agents don't even ask for a synopsis with a query (although they may want one later); others ask for a "brief synopsis," but don't explain what constitutes "brief." Notwithstanding these vague instructions, the industry standard seems to be from one to three pages. It's not a bad idea to have several synopses written in differing lengths. If an agent asks for "brief," send the one-page synopsis.

It is acceptable to single space a synopsis if it is only one page. However, anything over a page should be double-spaced. The synopsis should be formatted like a manuscript, with an acceptable font, such as Times New Roman, 12-point (don't use a smaller point size to fit it into a page; an agent will notice). You should have one-inch margins on all sides, and indent the first lines of paragraphs. On the first page, above your synopsis, include the title of your book, centered, with the word "Synopsis" underneath the title. If you have more than one page, include your last name and title of the book in the upper left-hand corner of the header on subsequent pages: Venard/*My Most Excellent Book*.

A synopsis should always be written in third person, present tense, even if the book is narrated in first person. Conciseness is key with a synopsis. Writing a tight synopsis will also help you distill the essence of your story, critical if you ever do an elevator pitch (more on that later).

## **What should a synopsis include?**

While this is a summing-up of the plot, you also need to show much more in a synopsis. A dry recitation of the plot won't impress anyone. An agent and/or acquisition editor wants to see much more. Here's what you should consider including:

**Your protagonist:** Her dilemma, the conflict that drives her, and how she overcomes the conflict (in short, the character arc). Your protagonist's story needs to be clearly, but succinctly, told. Don't include all of the protagonist's backstory. If something in the backstory is relevant as part of her motivation, then briefly mention it.

**Other important characters:** Don't include all the minor characters, but do include those who affect the protagonist the most, such as a sidekick, a love interest, or the antagonist.

**The plot's main points:** If you outline your books before writing this, you got this. If not, you may have to go back and figure this out. You need to show the inciting incident—the point at which the protagonist's life is disrupted—as well as the main points of the escalating action, and then the climax and ending.

**Your voice.** Just as you need to have a strong voice in your novel, that voice should carry over into your synopsis. If your book is humorous and lighthearted, that needs to come through in the language you choose for the synopsis.

**A sense of the subgenre.** If you are writing a paranormal mystery, then the paranormal element needs to be clear in your synopsis. If there's a romantic element, then the romantic plot or subplot should be explained. However, do not include all subplots in your synopsis—or mention them only briefly. The main plot should always be the focus.

#### **How do you whittle down the synopsis?**

Simply, go chapter by chapter and write only one sentence about each chapter, including the important points in that chapter. (This is also helpful if you are revising—if you have a chapter in which nothing happens and the story does not move forward, you may have a

problem.) Once you have this outline, you can pare it down and fashion it into something more elegant.

## **Nonfiction Book Proposals**

If you've written, or are writing, nonfiction, the process is a bit different. You'll still have to write a query letter, but not a synopsis. Instead, you write a book proposal, and you can do this before your book is completed.

For nonfiction, one of the most important parts of your proposal will be your platform, according to acquiring editor Johanna Castillo. She wants to see how active you are in social media—Facebook and Twitter, for example—and how much of a following you have. She wants to see your expertise in the subject matter (for example, do you teach classes?). Ideally, you'd already have a blog and/or will have published about the subject in magazines or journals. "I want to see that you are already building an audience," she said. You should also have a detailed marketing plan—how will you sell your book?

Also, publishers recommend that you research other contemporary books in the subject area. Your proposal should give examples of these other books and spell out how your own book is different.

Your book proposal should also have:

- A solid, catchy title and subtitle
- A Table of Contents, with a one-paragraph description for each chapter. This can change later, but agents and publishers will want to have an idea of the structure and main points.
- An excerpt (usually the first chapter)

- A succinct book description
- A description of your target audience
- Your biography, with your credentials for writing this book

### **The ‘Elevator Pitch’**

Sending out email after email is not the only way of finding an agent or publisher.

Conferences are another way of successfully connecting with someone. If you are attending a conference or convention, you’ll need an “elevator pitch.” This is what you would use when you are in an elevator for two minutes with an agent—or any occasion where you only have a few minutes to pitch your book. Sounds easy. But it isn’t. I’ve attended conferences with “pitch slams” in which participants get thirty seconds to explain their book to a panel of agents and publishers, who then critique the pitches. Few participants have flawless pitches.

Among the problems: rambling, not saying which genre the book is in, not being natural or conversational, not being specific (talking about the overall themes doesn’t work), and not being concise.

Agents and publishers want to know about your characters and their world—but the fewer words, the better. Sounds impossible, but it can be done!

Publisher Stacy Whitman, at one conference, advised that a pitch should be “X meets Y.” In other words, use comp titles to sell your book. But when using similar books, be careful of using iconic books, since you are setting high expectations, she and Toni Kirkpatrick, an acquisitions editor, said.

Both women say that, if approached at a conference, they want the pitches to flow from natural conversation. Buttonholing an agent or publisher and immediately pitching your book is

not necessarily going to win them over. Once you get to the pitch, keep it short. “If they want to know more, they’ll ask,” Whitman said.

All of these—elevator pitches, queries, and synopses—will, in the end, only hook an agent or publisher if your first chapters are as good as they can be. Some agents and publishers say they *start* with the sample chapters when they are emailed or mailed a submission. They’ll only read the query letter and synopsis if those first few pages hook them.

### **Case Studies: Successful Queries**

Below are two examples of queries that have worked. The first one is from mystery writer Tracy Weber, and it landed her an agent almost immediately. She is now published by Midnight Ink, a well-known publisher of crime fiction. Tracy says she always inserted a sentence at the beginning telling the agent why she was querying her specifically. This query works because it shows the author’s voice. Tracy also compared her manuscript to other books.

Dear Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

Seattle yoga instructor Kate Davidson has unusually tight hamstrings encased in Miss Piggy-like thighs, and she often acts more like a champion fighting rooster than the Dalai Lama. When she’s not teaching yoga, she spends her time hiding from her creepy landlord and dodging her best friend’s relentless matchmaking attempts. Even though her father was a cop, Kate has zero crime-fighting aspirations. She has enough trouble keeping her struggling yoga business afloat while trying to live up to yoga’s Zen-like expectations.

Then she stumbles over a body in the studio’s parking lot.

The police dismiss the murder as drug-related street crime, but Kate knows that George—a homeless alcoholic she had befriended—was no drug dealer. And if the police won't take his murder seriously, she'll just have to solve the crime herself. After all, "Drunk Dies in Drug Deal Gone Bad at Yoga Studio" isn't exactly the free publicity she's been hoping for.

Kate stretches herself and takes on two new challenges. First, solve George's murder. Second, find someone—anyone—willing to adopt his intimidating, horse-sized German shepherd, Bella, before Animal Control sends her to the big dog park in the sky. But with Bella's time almost up and the murderer hot on her trail, Kate will have to work fast. Or the next time she practices Corpse Pose, it may be for real.

MURDER STRIKES A POSE combines Susan Conant's love of dogs with Denise Swanson's humor, then adds a splash of Janet Evanovich's irreverent sassiness for flavor. Cozy mystery fans looking for a lighthearted read will thoroughly enjoy Kate Davidson's exploits.

MURDER STRIKES A POSE is complete at 69,000 words. I hope to feature Kate and Bella in a continuing series of Downward Dog Yoga Mysteries. I am currently at work on a sequel, MEDITATION CAN BE MURDER.

I am a certified yoga therapist, as well as the owner of a successful yoga studio in Seattle.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Tracy Weber

Below is another well-crafted query, from client Susan Van Kirk, also a mystery writer. Her first series was published by Five Star Publishing. This query encapsulates the novel's themes and storyline succinctly, while also hooking us right away. Susan had published another book; while it is not fiction, she did include that, as it is nevertheless publishing experience.

Dear Ms. \_\_\_\_\_,

I am looking for representation for my cross-genre mystery, **THREE MAY KEEP A SECRET**. It is a 72,000-word amateur sleuth novel and also a police procedural. Both its premise and protagonist are unique.

At my novel's core is this unnerving question: What if your worst nightmare—an incendiary death—came true, and you were chained to a cement floor in an isolated barn that was rapidly going up in flames? Grace Kimball finds herself in exactly this position. She is an unusual protagonist because, unlike most mystery heroines, she is not a thirty- or forty-something sleuth. Grace—like millions of baby-boomers who read these mysteries—just retired without a Plan A, B, or C. She was a high school teacher in the small town of Endurance, Illinois, and her one retirement decision will endanger her life.

Grace's past has forced her to be strong. She survived both a college fire that killed her two roommates and raised three children following the untimely death of her husband. Brenda Norris—a shoddy journalist and Grace's former teaching colleague—is murdered in a suspicious fire, leaving

an endless line of potential suspects. Grace is drawn into the investigation when she steps into Brenda's job.

As she researches the town's past for a centennial celebration story that includes a cold case with three deaths, she explores the same path as the murdered Brenda. A second killing occurs, leaving no doubt that one of Grace's neighbors is hiding a dark secret—a past he will kill to protect. While Grace races to meet a newspaper deadline, her friend, Detective TJ Sweeney, scrambles to find a killer. Grace's investigation leads her toward her worst nightmare—a fiery death that has stalked her dreams since she escaped it in college.

My professional background includes teaching high school English in a small town for thirty-four years and college education and communications courses for another ten years. My short story, "War and Remembrance," was published in Teacher Magazine (Mar/Apr 2006.) I published a memoir, THE EDUCATION OF A TEACHER (INCLUDING DIRTY BOOKS AND POINTED LOOKS), as a POD book with iUniverse (September, 2010.) I have also worked as a contract writer for Wiley & Sons.

I thank you for your time and consideration.

Susan Van Kirk

Susan ended her query with her contact information, including her website and blog URLs, showing that she was already promoting herself.

## **Finding Agents**

Where do you find agents? Here are some sources:

Agentquery.com

Publishers Marketplace

*Writer's Digest*

Publishing ... And Other Forms of Insanity

The acknowledgments sections of books in the same genre.

## **Further Reading**

*Bulletproof Book Proposals* by Pam Brodowsky and Eric Neuhaus (for nonfiction authors)

## Chapter Five: Self-Publishing Basics

There's much to write and say about self-publishing and this chapter is by no means comprehensive. But it should give you some insight on what you will need to do. I've already talked about finding an editor and having beta readers, and marketing is covered in another chapter.

These are other steps you'll need to take:

1) Form an imprint. Officially, you can do so by forming a DBA (Doing Business As). There are minimal costs associated with this, and they vary from state to state. It will look more professional if your book is published under the name of an imprint (some of my clients' imprint names have included Monteagudo Publications, Alter Ego Publishing, and Artemis Hunter Press, for example) and having a DBA may help with tax issues down the line. You may also want a graphic artist to create a logo for your imprint; this is usually very inexpensive, especially if you package it with other work.

2) Buy an ISBN or a block of them at [Bowker](#), the official ISBN agency in the United States. One number costs \$125, but a block of ten is \$295. You cannot use one ISBN for all versions of your book; you'll need a separate one for an ebook, a hardcover, a softbound, a PDF, etc.

You don't necessarily need to buy an ISBN if, for example, you are publishing only through Amazon. They will provide a 10-digit ASIN unique to your ebook. However, they will then be the publisher of record (the author still retains all rights). Some bookstores may not

accept books published only through Amazon, but best-selling author Hugh Howey eschews paying for ISBNs. His reasoning is at this [post](#).

Bowker also sells barcodes (for print books). Again, Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing will provide one for free if you publish your book through them.

3) Seek blurbs from other authors. If you've joined a group of writers, such as Sisters in Crime or Romance Writers of America, then solicit blurbs from fellow members. It will be harder to get a blurb from a well-known (and busy) author, but you can always ask. These blurbs can be used on the back cover, front cover (especially from a big-name author), or in the first few pages of the book. You can also use them on press releases, bookmarks, and other promotional material.

4) You'll want to get started on the front and back cover as you are editing your book. There are many places to find good cover designers. Recommendations are best, so ask an author whose cover you've liked. Keep in mind that an ebook cover must look good at thumbnail size. A good designer will know this, and will help lead you through the design process.

Some authors "crowdsource" their cover, asking readers, friends, and family (via Facebook and email lists) to vote on their favorite from among several choices. That's one way of finding out what will grab readers! [Here](#) is one author's experience doing that.

I don't recommend going the DIY route on the cover, unless you are a graphic artist. I've seen too many amateurish covers done by those with no graphic experience. You want a cover that will compete against traditionally published covers, since this is the first impression your book will make. As Smashword's Mark Coker says, "Good covers make a promise." So make

sure your cover reflects the content of your book, whether it's sci-fi, romance, or mystery. The image, without even a title, should convey what your book is about.

5) Have your book's interior formatted. You can format a book yourself and there are DIY templates. But hiring a professional interior formatter/designer is usually inexpensive, and it will save you a lot of time and hair-tearing. I cover formatting in more detail down below.

5) Choose a distributor. Many authors sell only through Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, the largest retailer of ebooks. This is because you can only do promotions if you enroll in KDP Select, and KDP Select requires exclusive publishing rights for a 90-day period—so you cannot sell or give away your book through other channels. During this period, you have five days during which you can promote your book for free or at a lower price. You will also be part of Amazon's lending library. Many authors say they've put up their book on several channels, but sell 99 percent of their books through Amazon. For Canadian authors, however, or those wishing to sell in Canada, Kobo is a strong competitor to Amazon.

If you do want to sell through other channels, I recommend you try KDP Select for at least the first ninety days and later upload your book to other channels. [Smashwords](#), the largest distributor of self-published ebooks, is one channel to getting your book into other retailers, such as Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Lulu, OverDrive, and Apple iBooks. There are other services, such as [BookBaby](#) or [Draft2Digital](#), that also provide this service.

If you want to get your books into bookstores and libraries nationwide, you'll have to deal with one of the preferred distributors of Ingram, which is the biggest wholesaler for bookstores, and with [Baker & Taylor](#), the major player for libraries. You can learn more about

Ingram's distribution [here](#). The distributors listed above—Smashwords, BookBaby, and Draft2Digital, work with Ingram and Baker & Taylor.

You can also go directly to Barnes & Noble, now the largest bookstore chain in the United States. Their criteria for evaluating your book and placing it in stores is [here](#). Of course, if there are independent stores in your area, you should approach them yourself, in person. One note: Many smaller stores accept books only on consignments, and take 30 to 40 percent of the sales. You may get 60 percent of the profit, but on consignment you have to pay the base cost of the book and any shipping expenses. Some authors say they only break even or make very little money selling books this way, so take that into consideration. [Here](#) are some tips on selling on consignment.

6) Do the metadata. For some reason, this seems to scare some authors, or perhaps just puzzle them, as they don't know what metadata means. Simply, metadata is what you use to describe your book, and it helps readers discover your books. When you upload your book to an online retailer, the descriptions you fill out are metadata. It can include the ISBN, book name, author's name and other contributors, book category, publication date, book description, and tags.

It's important that your book description and tags have keywords that will properly categorize and describe your book, and help readers who are searching for "vampire love stories," for example. Just listing a genre—"mystery"—is too broad and encompasses a whole range of books, from cozies to thrillers. Even within a subgenre, you can drill down. One author who wrote a thriller is listed under mystery and suspense, but also used "financial," "spies & politics," "espionage," "political," and "terrorism" as descriptive words. Readers looking within

a niche will be better able to find you, and your book might show up on recommendations for people buying similar books.

Joel Friedlander has more advice on metadata in this [post](#).

7) Set a price. For the most part, you want to price your ebook between \$2.99 and \$9.99 (you can go lower when doing promotions). You don't want to price it above \$9.99 because readers generally will not pay more. Also, [Amazon pays authors](#) a higher royalty—70 percent—for books between \$2.99 and \$9.99. For anything below or above, the royalty option will dip to 35 percent.

The sweet spot seems to be between \$2.99 and \$4.99. This is what most ebook readers expect to pay. Readers will take a chance on a new author at this price, but usually not for a book above these prices. Pricing even lower may draw more buyers; you will get less royalty per book, but you may sell more books at the lower price.

Authors with more than one book, especially in a series, use the first book as a loss leader, offering it for free or very inexpensively, in order to hook readers.

8) Seek advance reviews. I talk more about this in marketing, but start sending out either PDFs or ARCs (Advanced Readers Copies) to reviewers and bloggers. You should be sending these out a couple of months before publication.

9) If you want greater protection, get a copyright. This is unnecessary, for the most part, since you automatically have copyright to anything you've written. But if you want more formal protection, and the ability to sue someone else for misuse of your material, then you can get copyright protection for \$35 at [www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov).

10) Speaking of protection, you might want to sit down with an attorney if your book touches on real-life events or real places (even if fictionalized). A few clients have found the hour or two of an attorney's fee worthwhile. Some authors do ask permission from the owners of real places (stores, restaurants, hotels, etc.). This isn't always necessary, but it's a good practice to follow, and some of those store owners may even want to sell your book.

11) Get permissions. Are you using poems, song lyrics, parts of books, graphics, or other work created by someone else? If so, you will need to get permission. You can either write to them yourself or hire a permissions editor. You can use material already in the public domain. This [free publication](#) has more information on what's in the public domain.

12) When you are done with all the above steps and have uploaded your book, make sure to get at least two proofs (if you are doing a print book). You want to make sure your cover—the art, the colors, the font—look as well in print as they did on your computer screen. You should also give the book another read; you may catch typos in printed material that went unseen on the computer.

### **Formatting books**

If you are an indie writer, then you are also your own publisher, and one of your responsibilities is having your book formatted—for ebook, print, or both. Below are some of the factors you will want to consider. I've inserted links throughout, because there is more information than I have room to cover here.

My first suggestion is to hire a professional interior formatter. It will take you far longer to format your own book, time you can spend doing marketing and other writing tasks.

A badly formatted book can immediately throw a reader out of the story. While you need to know certain formatting to submit to an agent, that's only a small part of what is involved in formatting for publication.

For print, you need to consider not only trim size (see below), but also font and size for a print book. Most new authors worry about font and size for an ebook, but you don't need to—because it is the reader who selects the font and size, for the most part.

Ebooks are easier to format than print books, and you can use a service such as Draft2Digital, which converts your Word document and easily lets you upload to various vendors. Smashwords is another option, but some authors have found their requirements for formatting much more extensive and hard to follow. They both provide free ISBNs and you don't pay upfront for their services (they do take a commission from your royalties). Because Draft2Digital will do the formatting for you, this service is quickly winning over authors.

Another way to format books yourself is to use book templates. Joel Friedlander, the book designer guru, has inexpensive [templates](#). Essentially, you are copying and pasting your Word documents into these templates, available for both ebooks and print. The templates start as low as \$29 for a single book license. These, however, work best for very simple books with no extras.

Friedlander also has an extensive [library](#) of articles on formatting and there's also good information at [Tugboat Design](#). There's more to formatting than meets the eye—for example, you may want to learn about [widows and orphans](#), page bleeds, [paragraphing](#), [typefaces](#), nonbreaking spaces and hyphens, drop caps, running heads, and much more.

The problem with attempting to format yourself is that you may miss some of the subtleties of formatting. As Joel Friedlander writes, “Word processors that are designed for letters, memos, business reports and the like are simply not up to the task of creating beautiful and pro-level book typography .... If you expect buyers, reviewers, and award judges to respond favorably to your book when comparing it to books that may have come from traditional publishers or from authors who have put together a team of professionals to create their books, it’s simply not good enough.”

It's still good to dip your toe into the world of formatting, so you can know what you want and don't want.

Amazon’s [Kindle Direct Publishing](#) also has resources and reading material for self-publishers.

I haven’t dwelled on other retailers because Amazon is the biggest player, especially in the United States. According to Michael Cader of Publishers Marketplace, as of 2017, Amazon accounted for 71 percent of the ebook sales, followed by iBooks (14 percent), Nook (9 percent), Google (2 percent), and other (4 percent). But you may certainly want to investigate other retailers.

### **Trim size**

Whether you are DIY formatting or hiring someone, the choice will be yours on the book’s trim size (trim size is the print book’s size). Generally, trade paperbacks are more inexpensive. The most popular sizes among self-publishers are 5.5” x 8.5” and 6” x 9”. (You can publish a hardback, but this is expensive and probably won’t sell as well unless you’re already a well-known author.) Not only are these two sizes the ones most used, but they also have

another advantage: anything larger than 6" x 9" may not fit on a retailer's fiction bookshelves. Those larger sizes are reserved for art books, cookbooks, workbooks, etc.

How do you choose which of the two sizes you want? You may want to look at published books to see if you have a size that appeals to you the most. Cost may also be a factor. Deborah Bradseth of Tugboat Design broke this down in a [blog post](#) in which she detailed the two popular trim sizes for trade paperbacks.

### **Other pages**

Another concern for self-publishers is what pages to include in your book—other than the story, of course. There are several moving parts to a book, divided into front matter and back matter. They are what they sound like: front matter are those pages before the story; back matter is what comes after.

In fiction, these pages can include:

Copyright page (see <https://tugboatdesign.wordpress.com/2015/11/05/copyright-page/> for what you need on this page and for samples)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments Page

Dedication Page

Author Bio

Glossary or Character List

Blurbs about the current book or past books

A note from the author asking readers to leave a review on Amazon, Goodreads, etc.

All permissions, in writing, that may be required to reproduce illustrations or previously published material.

Pages that are usually found in the front matter in print books are sometimes located in the back for ebooks, since you want a reader to be able to read most of that early chapter or couple of chapters in an Amazon preview. If that preview is cluttered with a Character List, blurbs, and an author's note, the reader will see less of the actual story.

Also be mindful that some of these front and back matter pages require special formatting, such as the Table of Contents.

### **Further Reading and Information**

Self Publishing Formula, <https://selfpublishingformula.com/category/podcast>. Mark Dawson, who also has paid classes, has many free podcasts for indie writers, with great writing and marketing advice.

*The Well-Fed Self-Publisher: How to Turn One Book into a Full-Time Living*, by Peter Bowerman

*The Indie Author Guide: Self-publishing Strategies Anyone Can Use* by April L. Hamilton

*Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur: How to Publish a Book* by Guy Kawasaki and Shawn Welch

## Chapter Six: Book Blurbs and Bios

So you now know how to write and format manuscripts, query letters, synopses, and online writing, from blogs to digital publications. But what about those other “bits”—author bios and book descriptions? Even though they are short, they can be just as frustrating to write.

### Book Descriptions

These are sometimes called back-of-the-book blurbs, although they are not always on the back cover. With hardbacks, these descriptions are on the front cover inside flap (the back cover is reserved for blurbs, or quotes, from other authors or book reviews). On paperbacks and softcovers, these descriptions are usually on the back.

With ebooks, these book descriptions are front and center on Amazon or BarnesandNoble.com. In any case, this is often what the reader looks at second—the first being the cover. The book description is what hooks a reader into buying the book, so it’s probably the most important short writing you will ever do. It can also be used in a multitude of places—from blog posts you write to promotion copy.

Word lengths vary from 100 to 200 words (paperback covers seem to be, at most, about 150 words; flap copy tends to be longer, up to 200 words).

What do authors include in these book descriptions? Here’s what makes for a successful description:

- 1) A clear sense of what type of book this is. It should not only reflect your story, but your voice. You do that, of course, by choosing words that show (not tell).

In Terrie Farley Moran's *Read to Death*, we get a sense of that by her words (I have bolded certain words for demonstration purposes):

"With their **book club** season wrapping up with *The Florida Life of Thomas Edison*, **Sassy and Bridgy** decide to take their group on a day-trip to the **beautiful** Edison and Ford Winter Estates. Hiring driver Oscar Frieland, who's known for his **colorful stories** and his love of the café's Robert Frost **fruit tartlets**, the bibliophiles set off for **a day of sunshine and history**. After **a lovely excursion**, the club returns to the café for lunch and a book discussion, but the group falls silent after Oscar is found dead in his van. The sheriff's deputies have some questions of their own for the group, and if the ladies don't find some answers soon, the next book they read might be from a prison library."

From the characters' names (Sassy!) to mention of delicious desserts, we know we're in cozy mystery territory. Contrast that with Catriona McPherson's *Quiet Neighbors*, another mystery set in a bookshop:

"It's the oldest bookshop in a town full of bookshops; **rambling and disordered**, full of treasures if you look hard. Jude found one of the treasures when she visited last summer, the high point of a **miserable** vacation. Now, in the **depths of winter**, when she has to **run away**, Lowell's **chaotic** bookshop in that **backwater of a town** is the safe place she runs to. Jude needs a bolt-hole; Lowell needs an assistant, and when an affordable rental is thrown in too, life begins to look up. The **gravedigger's cottage** isn't perfect for **a woman alone**, but at least she has quiet neighbors. Quiet, **but not silent**. The **long dead** and the books they left behind both have tales to tell, and the dusty rooms of the bookshop are **not the haven** they seem to be. Lowell's past and Jude's present are a **dangerous cocktail** of **secrets and lies**, and someone is

coming to light the taper that could **destroy everything.**”

It’s not a cozy, for sure, but something darker and twistier, we expect. Both stories are sure to please bibliophiles, with talk of book clubs and bookstores, but the descriptions promise two very different books.

2) Name your protagonists, but don’t tell the reader that much about them yet. In fact, we don’t know anything about Jude, really, except she’s running away—and this adds a wonderful layer of mystery.

3) Add in the setting. From Terrie’s description, we know it takes place in Florida, part of it in a café, which is sure to be quaint. We don’t know the city for Catriona’s book, but we know it is set in a “backwater” town, a description that tells us this will be an isolated and insular village, and in a dusty, chaotic bookshop, which immediately brings to mind an old shop crammed to the top with piles of books.

4) As seen by the examples above, you only need to hint at the plot. Avoid spoilers, but give a glimpse of the central conflict—who killed Oscar? And what are the secrets and lies in Lowell’s and Jude’s lives? End the description on a cliffhanger. See the last lines of the two examples I have given—they promise a bumpy ride, at the very least, for the protagonists.

### **Author Bios**

This should be easy—you know all about yourself, right? But the struggle in the author bio comes from telling about yourself in an interesting, entertaining way, rather than providing a resume. Here are some tips:

1) Tailor your author bio to your book. If you are writing a cozy, keep the author description light. A horror author, on the other hand, won’t be mentioning puppies and

rainbows.

2) Use the third person to write your bio. Readers will still know you probably wrote your own bio, so inject your own sense of humor or voice into the description. Tell us something unusual or funny about yourself, if it is appropriate.

You may want to make a list of five things about which you are passionate. Use one or two of those in your bio. People are always interested in someone else's hobbies or interests.

3) Keep your bio short, 75 to 150 words. This bio won't only go on your back cover or Amazon author page, but is something you can use on other platforms (Goodreads, Facebook) as well as blog posts and articles you write. Remember that readers have short attention spans online. If they have to click the "Read More" button on Amazon's author page, you may have written more than most readers will get through.

Bios may be longer on your website, where readers can go to learn more about the author and her books.

4) If you are a best-selling or award-winning author, by all means drop that into your description. However, if all you do is list publication credits in a dry manner, this will be less interesting to readers, who want to know you as a person.

5) Finally, make sure your bio is updated regularly. I have visited many Amazon author pages and found outdated information for quite a few authors. Make sure that information about books, prizes, and even your personal life (if you've included it) are all up to date.

On Amazon pages, include links to your blog posts and freshen up the page with videos and other new content every once in a while. These are steps you can take even if you only have one or two published books out. For an example of someone who does this effectively,

look at Hank Phillippi Ryan’s Amazon page and her “Author Updates.”

Some examples from Amazon author pages:

“Mary Feliz writes the Maggie McDonald Mysteries featuring a Silicon Valley professional organizer and her sidekick golden retriever. She’s worked for Fortune 500 firms and mom-and-pop enterprises, competed in whale boat races, and done synchronized swimming. She attends organizing conferences in her character’s stead, but Maggie’s skills leave her in the dust.”

Mary’s bio showcases quirky interests that make her appealing—whale boat races and synchronized swimming—but she also drops in a hint of her character and what her series is about.

Krista Davis is succinct (79 words), but yet her bio tells us something about her books as well as about herself:

“New York Times best-selling author Krista Davis writes the Domestic Diva Mysteries and the Paws & Claws mysteries for dog and cat lovers. She grew up devouring Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and Agatha Christie and still loves a good mystery. Like her domestic diva, Sophie Winston, Krista enjoys cooking (okay, eating!) and entertaining, but she’d just as soon leave the cleaning to someone else. She lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains with two cats and three dogs.”

One of my clients, Erin Michelle Sky, has the perfect quirky bio for her YA books (which can also be read by adults): “As a child, Erin fell in love with llamas and with the books of Anne McCaffrey, whose Dragonriders of Penn series inspired her to become a writer. When she finally met Anne McCaffrey at a fantasy convention some two decades later, she wept uncontrollably throughout the entire affair. She does significantly better with llamas.”

Hopefully, these bios will spark some ideas. You might also want to look at other authors writing in your genre or subgenre. What attracts you about their bios? How can you replicate that in your own bio?

## Chapter Seven: Marketing

Time after time, I've edited books that are well-written, compelling, and entertaining—only to hear later from the authors that sales are very low. The cause is not the book, but weak or misdirected marketing efforts—and a market flooded with low-cost ebooks that makes it harder for one book to stand out. You may have written a wonderful book, but if readers don't know about it, they won't be able to find it.

I cannot stress enough the importance of publicity and promotion. You should start getting the “buzz” going two to three months before your book is even published. Below are a few ideas, but I urge you to think outside the box, and find other venues where you can promote your book.

Whether you have been published by a traditional publisher, even one of the Big Five, or are self-publishing, it will be up to you to do most of the publicity and promotion. You can, of course, hire a publicist to do it. If you do hire someone, make sure you know upfront what they will be doing for you. I've heard mixed reports from authors: some have loved their publicists, while others felt it was wasted money.

Marketing can be scary—or at least puzzling. It can also be overwhelming. Below I go into detail on pieces of it, but for the beginning author, I suggest focusing on six pieces of marketing:

- 1) Create your own website. This is crucial for authors.
- 2) Blog on established sites.

3) Attend book signings and talk about your book—at libraries, book fairs, craft fairs, or anywhere you can set up a table. Authors have even sold their books at tables in regional airports, churches, and the local bank.

4) Seek reviews for Amazon and Goodreads.

5) Start a mailing list and periodically send out newsletters with updates about your book or promotions you may be doing.

6) Set up a Facebook page and advertise your book on Facebook. Facebook “parties” have also become an important way to launch your book and reach a wide audience. [Here’s](#) more advice on Facebook parties and what they involve.

## **Your Website**

Every author should have a website. It’s a critical part of promotion, and you can set up a basic site for free through WordPress, Weebly, or Blogger. This [service](#) allows you to create a website specifically for authors. Look at other websites for authors in your genre, and see what they are doing.

My suggestions for a website would be to include some of the following:

- Something that engages the reader and asks for feedback; one author has a page where readers can have “conversations” with her characters.
- Links to social media, such as your Twitter feed, if you are active.
- A way for readers to sign up for your newsletter.
- An excerpt of your book (first chapter preferably, to get them hooked!).
- Extras, such as additional information about your characters that may not have made it into the books, or photos from where your books are set.

- A way to contact the author.
- A short author bio.
- Information about your books and links to where they can be purchased.
- A blog about your writing process, or other interests.
- A media or “News” page with photos of yourself and book covers; you

can also put recent announcements here, as well as a schedule of events.

- Reviews or blurbs about your book; you can also embed reviews from sites such as Goodreads.

## **Blogging**

Target those book blogs that review books in your genre, and send them a PDF or ARC—again, at least two to three months before launch date, so the reviewer will have time to read it beforehand. Blog tours are also popular. The blogger doesn’t necessarily review your book on a blog tour, but they will open up their blog for you to write a guest post or they’ll do a Question and Answer interview. You could probably design your own blog tour (it should run at least a couple of weeks), but there are also [sites](#) that, for a small fee, will organize a blog tour. Just make sure that you don’t sign up for a blog tour that is not suited to your story or genre. One author, who had written a thriller, ended up on a blog tour that was mostly for cozy mysteries, far more tame crime fiction than her gritty tale. There are more ways to find bloggers. Here’s one [post](#) with great tips.

## **Book Signings**

You probably won't sell a ton of books at your book signing—maybe you'll only sell a handful. However, the reason for book signings and library talks is to build buzz and get your name out in the community. This is a strategy that works over time.

Many authors, who are introverts, decide to skip this step. But if you are naturally social and love to talk about your writing, you may be quite successful at drawing people to a library or book event. Readers love to hear about the writing process!

Because there is so much to say about personal appearances, I have devoted the next chapter to it.

## **Reviews**

Much of your marketing will depend on getting the word out through the internet. Amazon.com and Goodreads are particularly effective. Most book consumers are savvy these days, and won't buy a book unless they've read a review.

**Reader reviews:** Your first effort should be to put your book in the hands of friends and family—offer them a free PDF in exchange for a review on Amazon, Goodreads, blogs, etc. (keeping in mind that their review may not be positive). Reviews are one of the most important ways of finding more readers. Here's what one person said recently on an online forum devoted to mystery book readers: "I can usually tell if I will like a book by the cover and the review. Now that I have a Kindle I go by the number of positive reviews. I do read a couple of negative reviews to see what someone didn't like."

If you want your book in libraries, prepublication reviews in the four traditional review publications are essential, according to *How Readers Find Books*, the 2011 Sisters in Crime

Publishers Summit Report. “Reviews in *Library Journal*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *Kirkus* are the single most important factor in library book selections,” the report says. Especially good news for the beginning writer is that the influential *Library Journal* likes to review first novels, as well as midlist authors—and they even review self-published authors.

Reviews on Amazon, particularly, are important for other reasons, which will be discussed below. Client A. Robert Allen successfully gets over a hundred reviews for each book. Below, under this chapter’s Case Study, he goes into detail on how he does it.

**Newspaper reviews:** Newspapers also review books, although over the years these review sections have shrunk significantly. But many authors still have been able to get a story published in their local paper. For that reason, I include a press release template at the end of this chapter.

Don’t send your book to a newspaper unless it’s been requested or you’ve spoken to someone there beforehand. Having worked at newspapers for thirty years, I can tell you what happens to advance review copies: they end up in the trash or on the “freebie counter,” where staff members can pick up books for their personal enjoyment. Large newspapers get hundreds of books a week, and review very few, as space for book reviews and the budget for reviewers continue to shrink.

You may want to try smaller community newspapers in your market or online community news sites. Keep in mind that you’ll want to have a “hook” for why a publication should write about you—what is new or different about you or your book? Having written a book is not sufficient reason.

**Paid reviews:** You can pay for a review through [Kirkus Indie](#), a program for self-published authors. There are other sites, such as [Chanticleer Book Reviews](#), modeled after Kirkus. Although you are paying for a review at these sites, there is no guarantee it will be one to your liking. Also, this option can be pricey, starting at \$425 at Kirkus. If you like your review, you have the option of having it published, for no extra charge. At Kirkus, the best known of the sites, it will be posted on the Kirkus website and sent to Google, Barnes & Noble, and distributors such as Ingram and Baker & Taylor. Additionally, you can use excerpts on your jacket copy or for promotional purposes. If the review is negative or otherwise not to your liking, you can opt out of having it on the Kirkus website and having it distributed. Kirkus and Chanticleer also have writing contests (for additional fees). While not inexpensive, a good Kirkus review may influence would-be readers.

**[Goodreads](#)** and **[LibraryThing](#)**: These are websites primarily for readers, but authors can really maximize exposure here, through giveaways (in exchange for reviews) and through virtual author chats. According to Goodreads, the average giveaway results in 825 entries, and many of these people mark the book on their “to-read” list, regardless of whether they win a book. Make sure you join the [Goodreads Author Program](#) and the [Goodreads Author Feedback Group](#); you’ll find invaluable advice, how-to videos, and a discussion board. Start promoting your book early; this [timeline](#) is on the Goodreads site. Finally, here are some [tips](#) from author Sarah Pinneo, who also gives classes on using Goodreads.

**Sites that advertise promotions:** Now we get to the importance of reviews. If you are doing a free giveaway or a promotion through Amazon (for example, selling the book for 99 cents for two days, rather than its regular price of \$3.99), then you want to advertise this

promotion. But many sites won't even accept your advertisement unless you already have reviews (and some ask for a certain number of 5-star reviews).

One of the best-known and biggest sites for these promotions is BookBub, which sends out an email to readers about free and discounted books. BookBub's [submissions page](#) has more information, but their criteria include critical reviews and customer reviews. BookBub's success, alas, means that the BookBub Featured Deals program, which shows a selection of free or discounted books in daily emails, has become expensive and it is now difficult to get a spot in such promotions, especially for new authors. However, there is also the BookBub Ads program. Adam Croft, a self-publishing author with more than a million books sold, uses this program to sell his books, sometimes at only \$5 a day cost to him. With BookBub Ads, you can target readers by genre and interests. You can also advertise full-priced, not discounted or free, books. The program allows you to run CPC (cost-per-click) or CPM (cost-per-thousand-impressions) campaigns. For information on these, read more on the BookBub website or search for Adam Croft's videos on YouTube.

I recommend that you run a free or discounted promotion on Amazon. It is especially advantageous if you have more than one book to offer readers. While your book is being offered at no cost, it will climb in the ranks. One client had 33,000 downloads the first day her book was offered for free, and the book's Amazon ranking went to #1 in both the Crime and Mystery free books categories (and the overall Mystery, Thriller category), and to #2 overall for free books.

Many authors say that sales continue to be above the norm for several days after the promotion. And, hopefully, some of those readers who have gotten the book for free will

review it. If your book is part of a series, readers may pay for others in the series once you've hooked them on that first one.

Some authors write a novella or short story just for that purpose—it's offered for free, a teaser to the author's other works. These books are called "perma-free," and one author writes about it in this [blog post](#).

Here's the experience of one author: She paid \$620 for a BookBub ad promoting her special (a discounted price of 99 cents) and also advertised it on Facebook. In less than a week, she sold more than 3,600 books at the discounted price, plus another 450 books from the first two in the series, at the regular price of \$2.99. She made over \$2,000, more than triple the cost of the ad. Obviously, the expensive ad paid off for her. As I said before, this really pays off when you have several books (so perhaps the best [advice](#) is to write more!).

And here's an interesting fact: [Polls](#) have found that bargain book buyers are more willing to try new authors, they read the books they download, and they become loyal readers.

There are lower-cost alternatives to BookBub you may want to explore. Some are:

[eReader News Today](#)

[Free Kindle Books and Tips](#)

[BargainBooksy](#)

[Bargain eBook Hunter](#)

[Pixel of Ink](#)

[Kindle Nation Daily](#)

[eBook Daily Deals](#)

[Ignite Your Book](#)

[Book Talk](#)

[The Fussy Librarian](#)

[Awesome Gang](#)

[Ebook Lovers](#)

[Goodreads Pay Per Click](#) (you set the price, say a total of \$50).

## **Mailing List and Newsletters**

Newsletters are the most direct way of reaching readers, and some experts say this is the most important marketing tool you can use. Self-publishing expert Mark Dawson says his mailing list is his most valuable asset, since he's in publishing for the long run.

When you attend a reading or other event, make sure to get email addresses. It is easy and free to create your own newsletter. If you have a website, you should have a link so people can sign up for your newsletter. The newsletter doesn't have to be long (a page) and you only need to send it out monthly or even quarterly. I like using [MailChimp](#), with its easy-to-use templates, but there are other services. A way to get new subscribers is to offer a contest each month, with one subscriber winning a mug or other small item.

Other good reader magnets, which won't cost you anything, are a short story, a novella, your first novel (once you have published several novels), or even bonus material not included in your books.

Use your newsletter to alert fans of book signings and other appearances, book promotions, awards you may have won, and upcoming books, especially if you are doing preorder sales. Preorder sales are available to self-publishing authors, not just traditionally published authors. While you are building your buzz, readers can preorder the book on

Amazon, giving you a significant bump in sales numbers. One debut author [writes](#) about how preorders helped her, and what she did to continue to keep sales high.

## **Facebook and Social Media**

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr—the list goes on and changes constantly. Social media is important but you may be stretching yourself too thin by trying to do too much at once. Pick one or two of these, and engage your readers. Jane Friedman, former publisher of *Writer's Digest*, has a good post on social media [here](#) at Writer Unboxed (a good site to follow).

If you are just starting out with social media, you may want to concentrate on Facebook. Many beginning authors find this the most useful. You can start by creating a Facebook author page. These pages allow you to list events, showcase your books, link to your newsletter or other social media, and keep track of which posts have the most hits. However, be aware that Facebook limits the number of people who see your page posts on their feed, hoping that you'll pay to [“promote” your posts](#).

You can, though, use Facebook in other ways. Look to join groups that target readers in your genre. A search in Facebook for “science fiction,” for instance, turns up several groups. You can post on these groups when you launch your science fiction novel, when you have promotions, or when you have other news about your book.

You can also pay for ads on Facebook. Authors have had varying degrees of success with [Facebook ads](#), but they are inexpensive enough that you can play around with them.

If you are writing nonfiction, it is crucial you have a platform, and that you be using one or more forms of social media.

## Your Platform

If you are seeking an agent and you receive an offer for representation, that agent will likely want to know what your platform—your marketing plan—is. Some publishers ask for a marketing plan as part of the submission process. It's a good idea to create one even if you are self-publishing. Your marketing plan should include, at the least:

- Your website, blog, and newsletter.
- Author events you have set up or hope to set up, such as signings and readings at local bookstores, libraries, or community groups.
- Where you plan to send books for reviews, and any interviews you have set up.
- Press releases: Who you plan to send these to, such as local newspapers, alumni groups, social affiliations, etc.
- Competitions you've entered or plan to enter.
- Conferences you've attended or plan to attend; any panels in which you will be a participant.
- Membership to writing groups.
- Promotional materials (see more on this below).

If you are self-publishing, think of your “brand.” This can include a snappy tagline that you use on all of your promotional material, as well as a “look.” This look should reflect your covers and run through your website, your social media, and your promotional material. See Diane Vallere's [website](#) and take a look at her different series to see how that brand runs through them. Take note of her tagline: “Fiction for women who like shoes, clues, and clothes.”

## Start Early!

Now that you have all these tools to promote your book, remember to begin the process *before* your book is published. Mystery author Edith Maxwell, who writes several series, recommends starting a year ahead, especially for new authors. She's allowed me to use these very useful tips:

- Make sure you have a decent website, with contact information, up-to-date news, bio, and maybe weekly short blog posts or some kind of teaser. If you have prior pub credits, include them.
- Get a professional headshot done and use it everywhere.
- Create your Amazon and B&N author pages and keep them up-to-date.
- Create a Twitter handle and tweet however often you can stand—daily, weekly, monthly, using hashtags like #mystery #chef and any that pertain to your books.
- Participate on whatever other social media appeals to you. I like to set up a Pinterest board for each series. When I run across an image in my research, I pin it. Eventually, when your editor asks for cover ideas, you have a board all set.
- Create a Facebook Author page, if you want.
- With any social media, promote your fellow authors and other news more than you promote yourself. Push out news of, say, cooking events that might pertain to your series.
- Basically, establish your professional presence before the book comes out. It's always important that your platform is kept up to date. And have fun!

Here's [more information](#) on building that buzz from *Publishers Weekly*.

## Case Study: Finding Reviewers

I have been impressed by client A. Robert Allen, whose self-published historical fiction novels routinely have more than a hundred reviews, including his first book. These are great numbers for *any* author, but especially for a first-time author. Here, Allen goes into detail on how he found all those reviews:

It generally isn't a great idea to start with a negative, but sometimes it does bring home a point—what could be worse than an Amazon product page for a new book from a first-time author that has been out for a few months with no reviews? If this is where you wind up, please understand it isn't a good place! Reviews provide social proof of the worth of your book. While you hope they will be fabulous, some critical reviews can also be helpful, especially if they are thoughtful. If you have a large number of reviews with nothing critical at all, it is actually hard for readers to believe they are real reviewers.

So how do you go about getting reviews? Many people start with family and friends. While that may be an obvious strategy, it shouldn't be your only strategy. You should also know that Amazon is trying to catch and remove reviews they believe are based on a personal connection and, therefore, not totally objective. There are various ways they do this. For example, they might check the link that brought you to the site, to see if there is a personal connection. On the other hand, if somebody buys your book on Amazon and then posts a review, it is considered to be a "verified" review and it carries more weight. There is nothing wrong with providing complimentary copies of your work to reviewers in exchange for their honest opinion of your work, but they need to disclose this in their review. Established reviewers can help you to gain a following and spur your sales as well as your rankings.

There are some services that charge a fee for reviews and while they may frame it in some ethical way, I think this is a hard sell. If you become known as someone who games the system, it will hurt your long-term reputation—and remember, I’m writing this for people who are looking to make self-publishing an ongoing part of their life.

When I published my first book, *Failed Moments*, a few family members and friends posted reviews early on, but I knew that I needed to reach out to the community of reviewers to get solid social proof of the quality of my novel. I turned to Amazon and Goodreads and started navigating my way through their sites to find reviewers who might be interested in my work and then I reached out to them. Here is how I did it.

Amazon was difficult in that I started visiting the product pages of books within my genre with the idea that if a reviewer read and liked a similar book, perhaps they would be interested in mine. As I began to read through the reviews, I noticed a number of things. First, some of the reviewers had special badges next to their names that indicated “Top 500 Reviewer” or “Hall of Fame Reviewer.” I realized that additional prestige was associated with these individuals and they went to the top of my list. The problem in finding reviewers this way was that after reading through the review and determining that the reviewer was either positive or elegantly negative (critical comments were presented in a constructive and not a mean-spirited manner), I often discovered there was no contact information. So there was all of that wasted time in sifting through reviews, only to find there was no way to contact the reviewer. As a result, I started to reverse the order of my activities and I looked first for the contact information and then began to vet the reviewer—still, it was a very time-consuming process.

After spending a tremendous amount of time discovering reviewers this way, I found a tool on the [Author Marketing Club](#) website called the Review Grabber, which sifted through the Amazon website based on criteria that I established and returned potential reviewers with contact information. This saved a lot of time. By the time my second book was being published, I found another tool called the [Book Review Targeter](#) that did much the same thing. I recommend that you seek out a tool like one of these to pursue Amazon reviews in a more time-efficient way.

Goodreads is also an excellent place to find reviewers. I love the site and I've met some of my most passionate readers through interactions in this web-based community, which has been acquired by Amazon. My strategy in finding reviewers on Goodreads began with analyzing their posted lists of top reviewers. I would click on a reviewer's profile and see if they had an interest in historical fiction, and if they did I put them on my list of potential reviewers to contact. I had some success with this approach, but I did even better when I focused on a book that I found that some of my early readers also liked. It was called *Yellow Crocus* and it was quite popular, with thousands of posted reviews. I started to realize that if someone loved that book, it was quite likely they would enjoy mine. That became both my approach as well as the gist of my message to the potential reviewers when I reached out to them.

I met many excellent reviewers through Goodreads, but you have to be very careful that your correspondence is not considered to be spam. Goodreads carefully monitors its own internal email messaging system. You are limited to sending twenty-five email messages a day, so you cannot do any large bulk emails. If a Goodreads member complains about your message being spam, Goodreads could take some negative action toward you. I was very careful and

spent a great deal of time crafting a message that was personal, respectful, and attractive. The people who responded to my email requesting a review were flattered and many of them became true fans. I was very careful not to seem “spammy” in any way, however, because the Goodreads platform is an important one for authors, and you do not want to be on their “bad” list.

Within seven months of publishing my first book, *Failed Moments*, I had over a hundred reviews with ninety on Amazon and about eighty on Goodreads. When a Goodreads reviewer posted on Goodreads, I would send them a thank you note and ask if they would consider posting on Amazon as well as joining my mailing list. If the review was critical—thank God very few were—I still thanked them, but didn’t ask that they post on Amazon or join my mailing list. In some cases, they might post or join anyway—as an author you can’t control that. The main guideline with negative reviews is to never to engage the reviewer. If you receive an organic negative review, one you didn’t request, there should be no response at all from you. If you requested the review, common courtesy requires you to thank them for taking the time to share their thoughts about your work.

You can manage the reviews that appear on your product page by asking a few people to click that they are either helpful or not. Try to have the heavy-hitting reviewers with their “Hall of Fame” badges labeled as helpful, so they appear at the top and push others to a lower position on your product page. You can also indicate that a negative review was not helpful, but you don’t want to start a war with the reviewer.

When I was about to publish my second book I reached out to those reviewers who seemed to enjoy my first book the most and asked them to be an early reviewer. My book was

published in mid-August and available on Amazon, but my promotional activities didn't announce the "hard launch" until the end of September. By then I had over seventy excellent reviews, which was helpful, and my second book got off to a much better start than my first. My reviewer base was so strong by the time I published my third book that I didn't need to search for so many new reviewers and I had a hundred reviews within two months of publication.

Some final words about reviews—the best way for you to get the book in the hands of reviewers is to email them the final *.mobi* file for Kindle or a pdf. There is no cost to you and many people enjoy reading in this format. There are still many who prefer paperbacks. After initially buying a quantity at my discounted author price of \$3, buying shipping materials, taking the time to package things up, and then paying for postage, I found I was better off keeping the price of my paperback low (\$9.99) on Amazon during the review period. Given that I am an Amazon Prime customer, shipping is free, and my net cost after factoring my royalty from Amazon was \$7 shipping through Amazon versus \$8 doing it on my own. In addition, each individual Amazon purchase counted as a sale when I sent the reviewer a copy of my paperback via Amazon and I didn't have to bother with heading to the post office.

## Press Release Template

Publication date of book:

Contact Name:

Email address

Phone number

### **Praise for Title of Book Here**

Two to three short blurbs here, also centered. One or two lines for each blurb,

followed by the name of the reviewer. For example:

“Readers will enjoy this rollicking tale.”

— Kirkus Reviews

## **TITLE OF YOUR BOOK IN A BIGGER FONT**

**BY AUTHOR NAME**

Three to four paragraphs giving a synopsis of your book (but don't give away the ending). If this is a series, you should mention that and say which number in the series (second, third, etc.).

**About the Author**

A fifty- to sixty-word biography, with information about any prior publications.

**TITLE OF BOOK AGAIN IN ALL CAPS**

Name of Author

Imprint Name

Hardcover (or Trade Back)

ISBN number

Publication Date

Price

**CONTACT:**

Name

Phone number

Email address

## Further Reading

*How to Market a Book*, by Joanna Penn

*Let's Get Visible: How to Get Noticed and Sell More Books*, by David Gaughran (his website and weekly newsletter are also informative: <http://davidgaughran.com>)

*Secrets to Ebook Publishing Success*, by Mark Coker

*Sell Your Book Like Wildfire: The Writer's Guide to Marketing and Publicity*, by Rob Eagar

*The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published: How to Write It, Sell It, and Market It . . . Successfully* by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry

[Free book marketing template](#) by The Pantheon Collective

Adam Croft's "BookBub Ads for Beginners" tutorial: <https://youtu.be/ftHJG0P0IAI>

## Chapter Eight: Personal Appearances

Don't discount personal appearances as you reach out to readers. Personal appearances are so important that I decided this marketing effort should be set apart—it goes beyond marketing, as this may be the best way to connect with readers. I've met many of my favorite authors at conventions, and those are memories that I not only cherish, but which have cemented my fandom.

As a new author, you may not get many people showing up at your events, so consider ways of attracting more readers to your audience.

**Libraries and bookstores.** One way to attract a bigger crowd is to partner with other authors for a panel discussion at a library or for a reading at a local bookstore. Many libraries, by the way, have honorariums for speakers, so ask if you can get paid. Promote these with fliers and postings on Facebook. Don't rely on the libraries or bookstores to bring in customers. Authors with more experience have offered writing workshops. Here's a great [post](#) from author Lori L. Lake on ideas for library appearances.

**Launch parties.** You can get a big crowd at your launch parties, but you must promote these. Bookstores are the natural choice, but think outside the box. Client Cindy Sample did a luau-themed launch party for *Dying for a Daiquiri* at a big store that sells patio furniture. It was already decorated with palm trees and outdoor décor! Not only did she sell books, but some of her partygoers also bought patio items that were on clearance—so the store came out ahead, as well.

**Fairs, festivals, other venues.** Many writers set up tables at craft fairs, church festivals, and local fairs. Where else can you sell your book? If your book is set locally, are there local gift stores that might stock it? Does your book have a theme that ties in well with a specific type of store? Authors have successfully sold their books at candy stores, gourmet food stores, yoga studios, local visitors centers, and wineries (apparently, wineries work very well; perhaps alcohol loosens the purse strings!). One note: stores may want a split of the profit; anywhere from 20 to 40 percent is usual.

Anecdotal evidence is mixed, and it seems you have to consistently work at this to sell books. Cindy Sample hand-sold 3,300 books in four years, but she commits to about forty-five appearances a year.

If you are selling at a fair, think about buying a credit card reader, such as the ones from [Square.com](https://www.squareup.com) or [Paypal.com](https://www.paypal.com); some are free (although they take a small portion of each sale) and work with your smartphone or tablet. In this [post](#), Edith Maxwell has a list of what you should take with you when selling books.

**Conferences and conventions.** These attract not only writers, but readers, reviewers, agents, and publishers—all people that you want to reach. If you are a published author, you may be able to participate on a panel.

**Radio and TV shows.** Have you explored local radio shows and local-access television stations? These hosts are always looking for speakers, and the good news is that they love authors. You don't necessarily have to talk about your book, but can discuss other areas of expertise. Science fiction author Izzy Doroski appeared on radio shows to talk about the scientific theories behind his fiction, but also his work at a well-known science laboratory.

## Case Study: Speaking Before the Public

When one client asked me what he should speak about, I knew I had to go to an expert—Hank Phillippi Ryan, who not only is an award-winning crime fiction author, but has been a television journalist for more than forty years. She is the on-air investigative reporter for Boston’s NBC affiliate, winning thirty-two Emmy Awards. Hank is a whirlwind, appearing at all the big crime fiction conventions and constantly giving speeches—as many as one a day for two months when a new book is out. Her talks are engaging and seem natural.

Hank’s secret is to have a core stump speech—several speeches, actually, tailored to different lengths (from ten minutes to forty minutes). “Your stump speech should not be a sales pitch, but rather be about ‘what can I do for the audience?’” Hank says. “I categorize every speech I give as ‘giving,’ not ‘taking.’”

An author, Hank says, should ask herself: “What will my audience care about? What will they want to hear? What can I do for them?”

Hank gives a little biographical information, and talks about her journey as a writer. She talks about what kinds of books she writes, what they are about, and why she wrote them. She talks about her evolution from TV reporter to mystery author (and anyone can do this, as most authors had, or still have, other careers). Hank also includes funny, personal stories.

Hank admits to still getting “stage fright” before a speech, despite her many years in front of television cameras. Her stump speech, printed out and taken with her, is a safety net. She doesn’t read from it, but does refer to it.

Even if you’ve been asked to simply give a reading of your book, Hank advises to set up your segment, explain the book a bit, sketch out the characters and the conflict. And then read

from a printed-out page with big type, rather than squinting at your book. Shorter is better!

And make eye contact with the audience. The audience, after all, is there to connect with you.

Other tips from Hank:

- Wear something that you feel comfortable in, but that's dignified and respectful. Don't wear something that you will need to continue adjusting.

- Make sure what you wear will photograph well.

- Have good posture. "A friend of mine," Hank says, "imagines herself wearing a flowing black cape with a wind machine in front of her. It makes her stand tall."

- Maintain eye contact, connect with people in the audience. "You'll be able to gauge that people are with you," Hank says.

- Study other presentations. See what works and doesn't work for other authors. You'll know instantly what makes a successful presentation.

Finally, do not be discouraged if few (or no one) shows up to your talk. "Everyone has a story of how no one came to some event," Hank says. "Lee Child [a best-selling crime fiction author] tells now-hilarious tales of how at the beginning of his career, he talked to groups of two or three."

And remember, you will be getting publicity in the lead-up to the event, as your picture and book cover are on display at the store. So even readers who don't show up will learn about you and perceive your value to the bookstore hosting your talk. And even if only one person shows up, Hank says, it "may be the person who chooses books at NPR. You never know what

wonderful thing could happen. To focus on negativity is very destructive. You just have to persevere, and the next time will be better.”

### **Further Reading**

*12 Easy Keys to Successful Book Signing Events* by Carol Chapman

*Public Speaking for Authors, Creatives and Other Introverts* by Joanna Penn

## Chapter Nine: Financial Matters

*The following chapter was written by my husband, Dave Venard, an enrolled agent, a tax professional for many years, and a Certified QuickBooks ProAdvisor.*

With our passion for writing, the one area that we rarely want to mention, much less have to deal with, is accounting, taxes, and recordkeeping.

Starting at a very basic level, many authors treat their writing more as a hobby than as a true business. My best advice is that you should operate your writing as a business, expect to make a profit, keep track of your income and your expenses, and work at understanding the business elements of writing as much as you do the creative ones. By doing so, you will be in the enviable position of having options open and available to you when you need them.

This chapter will deal with several basic elements of the business to help you along this journey. These will include:

- How to distinguish between a hobby and a for-profit business.
- Basic recordkeeping needs.
- Choices for the business structure you can choose from as you start your new venture.
- Basic tax considerations for your new business.

## **Hobby vs. For-Profit Business**

Even if your priority is to get your book out into the world, presumably you still want to make some money, even if only to recoup your investment. So you will want to operate your business as a for-profit.

The IRS has established certain guidelines to determine whether a business is for-profit or a hobby. In general, taxpayers may deduct ordinary and necessary expenses for conducting a trade or business or for the production of income. Trade or business activities, and activities engaged in for the production of income, are activities which are labeled as for-profit.

The following factors, although not all-inclusive, may help determine whether your writing is an activity engaged in for profit or a hobby, according to the IRS:

- Does the time and effort put into the activity indicate an intention to make a profit?
- Do you depend on income from the activity?
- Do the expenses occur in the start-up phase of the business?
- Have you changed methods of operation to improve profitability?
- Do you have the knowledge needed to carry on the activity as a successful business?
- Have you made a profit in similar activities in the past?
- Does the activity make a profit in some years?
- Do you expect to make a profit in the future from the appreciation of assets used in the activity?

An activity is presumed for-profit if it makes a profit in at least three of the last five tax years, including the current year. This is known as a safe harbor in IRS terms. In other words, they will not challenge whether or not you are in business if you meet this criterion. It may take five, or even ten, years until you are finally published. During these years it is very likely that losses will be incurred before you show any income. While this is fairly common and considered normal within the writing and publishing industry, it is still important to demonstrate that you are in business to be a for-profit business.

Use the list above as a guide to the type of questions the IRS might ask if it were to examine your tax return, and be prepared to answer them. While not all of these factors even apply to writers, those that might be most important would include records of the amount of time you invest in your writing activities and in marketing or promoting yourself as a writer, the long start-up period normally associated with writing, and the fact that the final product, your book, actually has value once it is published. That value is the ongoing income stream from sales. While these issues and the need to have support is only going to be needed should the IRS examine your business expenses, it is much easier to document along the way than to try and go back and recreate that documentation only after an examination is started.

If an activity is not for-profit, losses from that activity may not be used to offset other income. An activity produces a loss when related expenses exceed income. The limit on not-for-profit losses applies to individuals, partnerships, estates, trusts, and S-corporations. It does not apply to corporations other than S-corporations.

If your activity is not being done for profit, allowable deductions cannot exceed the gross receipts or income for the activity. For more information, see the IRS site [here](#).

We will return to some of these concepts a bit later as we discuss the structure of your business and the tax issues related to it.

### **Basic Recordkeeping**

There are many elements to good recordkeeping. As I discuss them, my emphasis will be on how an outside party, such as the IRS, would view the records, since for many of us, we keep records only because our accountants make us.

Our records fall into many categories: financial records, such as bank accounts and financial software reports; legal records, such as our business structure or contracts with our publishers; time records, such as our calendars, diaries, or record of hours invested in our business; and creative records of our books, such as the drafts and evolution of our final manuscripts. It is necessary to maintain all of these records, both to document that we are in this business to make money and to protect our various legal rights and remedies should the need arise.

A basic filing system to keep all of these records organized can be as simple as a file drawer or more complex, with the records stored on the computer or in a cloud-based system. The point is—you need to have one.

I also recommend keeping your publishing income and expenses in a separate bank account. It simplifies the process of preparing taxes at the end of the year, as well as just tracking down an amount when you need to find it.

I also suggest using the resources you have around you to help with financial records. This can be as simple as keeping an Excel spreadsheet with all of your income and expenses

detailed on it, or using one of the many software or cloud-based options to help make this as painless of a process as possible, while still being current and accurate.

Accounting software prices have come down dramatically in recent years with the advent of SaaS (Software as a Service) applications in the cloud. For \$10 to \$20 per month you can have a complete accounting system that is always current, never has to be upgraded, and one that will always be available, even if your computer crashes. Three of the more well-known of these products are [QuickBooks Online](#) for about \$10 a month; [FreshBooks Cloud Accounting](#) for \$15 to \$25 a month (depending on the version you buy); and [Xero Small Business Accounting Software](#), which starts at \$9 a month. All of these programs have free trial periods and options to add features as you grow. Remember, we expect to make a profit.

One final bit of advice here: if you are unfamiliar with accounting and tax issues, as most of us are, have your family tax adviser or accountant, or somebody with a basic level of knowledge in these areas, help you set up the initial program. This helps ensure you are tracking the correct information that you will need to prepare tax returns and other reports throughout the year.

## **Business Structure**

If you are in business by yourself, the business structure you select will likely be a Sole Proprietorship, a Limited Liability Company, or a Corporation. If you have a partner, the structure could also be a Partnership.

The most common form of structure as you start a small business is the Sole Proprietorship. This is when you engage in business by yourself and for yourself. This is the easiest and least expensive form of business to set up. For the most part, there are no legal

formalities, although in some states a business license or business registration is required of Sole Proprietorships. If you are a Sole Proprietorship, all of your income and expenses will get reported on your personal Form 1040 tax return (on Schedule C as Self Employment) and should you be successful, the value of your books, published or unpublished, are considered part of your personal assets. For most writers, this works just fine most of the time. The only cost of establishing a Sole Proprietorship is the cost to register the assumed name if you are using one with the state or county. This is generally \$100 or less.

When you move into the realm of Limited Liability Companies and Corporations, the most common differences between them and a Sole Proprietorship are:

- 1) They can have an unlimited life (for when you are passing your royalties on to your heirs once you have become really successful).
- 2) They can have a variety of separate tax structures.
- 3) There is a separate level of liability protection between the entities and your personal assets and income. In other words, if the company is sued, your personal assets are generally not at risk, as long as you have the records previously discussed.

While these various business structures can and do provide a number of legal and tax benefits, it is not necessary to form one just to look more professional or like you are operating your company to make a profit. The IRS fully accepts a Sole Proprietorship as an acceptable form of business ownership.

Some of these entities, such as the single-member Limited Liability Companies and S-Corporations, flow right into your personal tax return, while a C-Corporation is taxed as a separate and distinct entity and is not a part of your personal income tax return.

Forming one of these legal entities varies widely from state to state as well as whether you do it yourself or have an accountant or lawyer do it for you. Generally speaking, you should expect to spend between \$200 and \$1,000 to form a separate business entity.

Which form of entity is the best fit for you is a personal decision that should be discussed with your family and professional advisers.

### **Basic Tax Considerations**

There are many issues that come into play during the normal course of starting a venture that have tax consequences. The most important is the distinction between being in business to make a profit versus having a hobby, as we discussed earlier in this chapter. Once you clear this hurdle, and you are acting like you are in business to make money, a number of opportunities open to save taxes.

I'm going to highlight a few of the most common, but again, you should have a discussion with a tax professional as you start, grow, and prosper in your new venture.

Writing and publishing, by its very nature, results in a lot of work, effort, and expenses before you make any money. That is OK, and you should be able to deduct those expenses along the way, and even use them to offset other income on your tax return. The IRS uses a standard that the expense needs to be ordinary, necessary, and reasonable in the particular situation.

These might include:

- Dues and memberships in professional organizations.
- Subscriptions.
- Research expenses, including travel.
- Expenses associated with attending conferences and conventions to promote your book.
- Payments to editors, cover artists, and other professionals involved in publishing your book.
- The expense of setting up a website or blog.
- The expense of a writing program such as Scrivener.
- Writing classes.
- Any other costs toward the publication of your manuscript.

There are even programs that allow you to take your medical expenses against your business income, instead of on Schedule A of your Form 1040, which allows you to deduct all of your medical expenses. These are called Section 105 plans by the IRS.

Another valuable deduction can be the use of your home in your business. In certain cases, you can deduct the cost of maintaining a portion of your home to use in writing and publishing your books. There are a number of requirements and restrictions when it comes to this deduction, but often it is worth going the extra mile to comply in order to take advantage of this benefit on your tax return.

### **Back up Your Work**

One last suggestion comes from the personal experience of a friend. He used his computer to do his writing, as most of us do. He was fairly good at creating a backup copy of his

work onto a thumb drive, in case anything happened to his computer, and he kept all of his handwritten notes and research in his desk. Several years ago, when Hurricane Sandy hit Long Island, New York, his home was flooded and his office, desk, and computer were underwater. He lost everything.

I would strongly encourage you to create a system to back up your work and critical documents to an off-site storage solution. Again, there are many choices. One that I have found particularly easy to use and does the backups constantly in the background is from [Carbonite Cloud Backup](#). A subscription starts at \$72 per year for one computer, but is well worth it in the event of a disaster when the other alternative is the loss of all of your work.

While all of the suggestions and comments in this chapter are directed toward writers who are self-employed, they are still fairly broad in nature. No financial and tax chapter would be complete without the perfunctory disclaimer—you should always consult with your own tax adviser to determine the specific impact any of these ideas may have on your own tax position.

## Chapter Ten: Other Tech Considerations

In a weather-related emergency, your first priority should always be your safety and the safety of your family. Afterward, though, what if you are facing a deadline that you must meet? As someone who has been through a few hurricanes, storms, and blizzards, I offer the following advice on tech tools that may help:

### **Power supply**

The most obvious remedy is to buy a power generator, especially if you live in an area prone to hurricanes or other natural disasters. This helped us immensely after Superstorm Sandy hit New York. The only problem is that we soon ran out of gas, so you may want to stock up on as much gas as you can.

Editor DeAnna Burghart, who has experienced many power outages in Southern California and Houston, had solar panels installed at home, with a battery backup. This is on the pricey end of solutions, but on a sunny day she will never go offline if power is lost.

There are car chargers for both cell phones and laptops. Look for a 300-watt power inverter that has two outlets and two USB ports. It may take time to fully charge a laptop—five hours or more—but it might be worth it if you really need that laptop.

For a short-term power outage, a battery backup and surge protector for your laptop and internet modem/router will be helpful. This can cover most of a day. Burghart has a UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) that gives her at least fifteen minutes to finish a task and shut everything down safely.

There are also waterproof solar chargers. Depending on which one you buy, they can charge anything from smartphones to tablets and even smaller laptops. However, these solar chargers take anywhere from seven to fifteen hours under full sun to fully charge (they also charge in a few hours via an adapter).

If you don't have any of these tools, public venues running on generators will sometimes have outlets or charging stations. They may allow you to use them. Another editor, Amarilys Acosta, who lives in Puerto Rico and experienced two hurricanes last year, used that strategy during several months without power. Likewise, a neighbor with a generator might let you charge a laptop.

### **Cell phones**

You can do a lot of work on your smartphone, from sending emails to doing research. Phones don't take as long to recharge as a laptop, so it's best to write all your emails this way. However, you want to conserve power with these too.

Make sure to disable Wi-Fi and lower the brightness on your device. Put it on Silent or Do Not Disturb, as sounds and vibrations drain the battery. If you need to write something long, disable mobile data or put the phone on Airplane Mode until you are ready to send or post what you wrote.

If you have also lost internet service—always a possibility when electricity is lost—you can connect your laptop to the internet through your cell phone. You will be using up—and probably going over—your monthly cellular data limit, but it might be worth it. You can tether your phone and laptop by using your Personal Hotspot or Portable Hotspot (under settings in most phones) or by connecting your phone into your laptop with a USB plug.

## **Backups**

A power outage can be just a blip that lasts a few minutes or a few hours, but if you haven't been saving your work you could lose it.

Burghart does most of her work on her desktop computer. She sets up a [subversion repository](#) for her work directories; new work is saved via her desktop but then she also saves it onto her laptop, making sure there are duplicates in both locations—she doesn't need an internet connection to do this. Of course, you can also copy work onto a hard drive, a memory stick, or onto a cloud drive—or a combination.

Other forms of backups are old-school. If you have advance warning of a storm, print out any work you are writing or editing (and save it in a Ziploc bag). If you lose power, you can always do the bulk of any work needed by hand.

## **Dealing with expectations**

It's up to you, of course, when or what you want to tell your clients or publishers about any potential issues.

“Most clients are understanding when they know exceptional problems loom,” Burghart said. “Natural disasters are uncontrollable by definition. What they don't like is constant interruptions and unpredictability. Good lines of communication and clear expectations work wonders.”

Tools such as the UPS and redundant backups are “essential business expenses,” she added. “Redundant backups upon redundant backups. It's the only way to fly.”

Finally, realize that “everything will be slower,” Acosta said. “It’s very irritating not having answers a click or a search engine away. So, it’s good to take a deep breath, remind yourself there is no power and thus nothing better to do, and then get to work.”

## Appendix: Other Resources

### Websites

[Alliance of Independent Authors](#), with a blog, podcasts, and online conferences.

[Independent Book Publishers Association](#) has several benefits for authors, including discounts on many programs.

There are other groups you can join to seek advice and hear stories from other authors. There's a very active [Yahoo group on self-publishing](#), and there may be other Yahoo groups based on your genre.

[Kboards](#), formerly called Kindle Boards, is for both authors and readers. It has online forums for authors, and some authors have found beneficial advice on publishing and marketing.

[SavvyAuthors](#) has classes, workshops, online forums, and other resources. They also solicit blog items, so this is another way to promote your book.

[Writing World](#) has advice on a myriad of topics.

### People to follow

Literary agent Rachelle Gardner at [rachellegardner.com](http://rachellegardner.com) and [facebook.com/agent.rachelle](https://facebook.com/agent.rachelle)

Publisher Jane Friedman at [janefriedman.com](http://janefriedman.com). You can also sign up for her daily emails or newsletters.

Author Anne R. Allen has wonderful advice on her blog, at <http://annerallen.blogspot.com/>, from writing tips to marketing.

Marketing consultant Peter McCarthy at [www.mccarthy-digital.com](http://www.mccarthy-digital.com)

Victoria Strauss, cofounder of Writer Beware, at [www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware](http://www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware) and [facebook.com/WriterBeware](https://www.facebook.com/WriterBeware).

Author Elizabeth Spann Craig at <http://elizabethspanncraig.com/blog/>  
[facebook.com/elizabethspanncraig](https://www.facebook.com/elizabethspanncraig).

### **Podcasts for writers**

Writing Excuses, [www.writingexcuses.com](http://www.writingexcuses.com), which has a tagline of “Fifteen minutes long, because you’re in a hurry, and we’re not that smart.” Although it has the name of “Writing Excuses,” it covers everything writing-related, from characterization to setting to sensory writing.

The *Writer’s Digest* podcast, <http://www.writersdigest.com/writers-digest-podcast>. Editors talk to experts and authors.

The DIY MFA podcast, <https://diymfa.com/diy-mfa-podcast>. Hosted by Gabriela Pereira, this podcast emulates the traditional MFA speaker series, with authors and industry experts.

The Story Grid, <https://storygrid.simplecast.fm/>. Developmental editor Tim Grahl and author Shawn Coyne in conversation. Hear them talk about scenes, story structure, and characters.

The Creative Penn, <http://www.thecreativepenn.com/podcasts/>, are podcasts by author Joanna Penn, who interviews other authors and publishing experts. There’s especially good information for those hoping to self-publish.

StoryWonk, <http://storywonk.com/podcasts/>, discusses books, TV shows, and movies. As their description says: “We analyze, critique, and celebrate pop culture, the art and craft of writing, the worlds, characters and relationships that fascinate us, and much more besides. Listening to a StoryWonk podcast is like having two smart friends over for dinner, and talking about the stories you love!”

Magic Lessons, <http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/magic-lessons/>, with Elizabeth Gilbert are podcasts of a little over an hour featuring well-known and not-so-well-known authors—but all of them interesting.

The Writer Files, <http://rainmaker.fm/series/writer/>, hosted by Kelton Reid, interviews authors in short podcasts of under 20 minutes.

Book Launch Show, <https://booklaunchshow.simplecast.fm>, by Tim Grahl talks about the fundamentals of launching best-selling books.

The Sell More Books Show, <http://sellmorebooksshow.com>. Hosted by Jim Kukral and Bryan Cohen, this show focuses on marketing-related topics.

The Author Biz, <http://theauthorbiz.com/category/podcasts>. Stephen Campbell interviews other authors and book reviewers on the business of being an author.

## Acknowledgments

Like many of you reading this book, I learned through doing—and through helping authors navigate their path to publishing, whether it was self-publishing or traditional publishing. I also learned quite a bit from two groups that I belong to: Sisters in Crime and the Guppies, an online chapter of SinC (I also sit on the steering committee). Both are generous groups; if you are a mystery author, you should be a member!

Many authors gave me ideas of what to include. I'm especially grateful to A. Robert Allen, Izzy Doroski, Edith Maxwell, Cindy Sample, Toby Speed, Susan Van Kirk, Tracy Ward, and Tracy Weber for their help. Best-selling crime fiction author Hank Phillippi Ryan, a past president of Sisters in Crime, spoke to me about public speaking and was instrumental for that chapter. An interview with author Jenny Milchman was eye-opening.

Even an editor needs an editor—in this case, a team of them! Several students from my copyediting courses read parts of my manuscript. I'm grateful to Mary Koppes, Keith Morrill, Alia Vander Lind, Ebony Vandross, and Maggie Zalesny; Maria Yohn Nease edited this second edition. I would recommend all of them for editing projects.



## About the Author

Lourdes Venard is the founder of [Comma Sense Editing](#) and a newspaper editor with more than 30 years of experience writing and editing at major newspapers, including *The Miami Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and *Newsday*. As a staff copyeditor, she was part of the teams that won two Pulitzer Prize staff awards (for reporting of Hurricane Andrew and the crash of TWA Flight 800). Her freelance editing includes crime fiction, science fiction, YA, memoirs, general fiction, and nonfiction; several of the books she has edited have won literary awards or been selected as award finalists.

She has spoken at national conferences about editing and has run training sessions for young journalists. She teaches copyediting through the University of California, San Diego, and Editorial Freelancers Association.

She has also written *Sensitivity Reads: A Guide for Editorial Professionals* and has contributed to *Professional News Writing*, by Bruce Garrison, and *Bake, Love, Write: 105 Authors Share Dessert Recipes and Advice on Love and Writing*, edited by Lois Winston.