

A STRONGER BOOK. A CLEAR NEXT STEP.

# Publishing Readiness Checklist

Twelve practical checks to help you choose a publishing route, prepare your book, and understand the commitments you make.

Read both paths to compare them. Complete steps 1-4, then 5-8 for traditional publishing or 9-12 for self-publishing. Check each box when you can meet its “Ready when” statement.

| Decision | Traditional publishing                                                                    | Self-publishing                                                                    |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Funding  | The publisher funds publication. Optional preparation costs may fall to you.              | You fund or perform editing, design, production and promotion.                     |
| Control  | The publisher usually leads packaging and timing; approval rights depend on the contract. | You direct the process within your budget and suppliers’ rules.                    |
| Rights   | Usually retain copyright and license specific publishing rights, often exclusively.       | Retain copyright while granting rights under platform and supplier agreements.     |
| Reach    | Publisher relationships can help. Placement and promotion still vary.                     | You arrange access to readers. Retail listings do not guarantee stocking or sales. |
| Income   | The contract defines any advance, royalties and deductions.                               | Platform payments must cover your publishing expenses before you make a profit.    |

Typical arrangements; individual contracts and programs govern. [\[1\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

Ownership and permission to publish are separate questions. Copyright protects the creative work; a license permits particular uses. An exclusive license can restrict your use of those same rights for its duration. An ISBN identifies a book format or edition; it does not establish copyright. [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[8\]](#)

If a company asks you to fund publication, evaluate it as an author-funded arrangement. Review the actual services, total cost, rights and exit terms, including for offers described as “hybrid.”

## 01 / FOR EVERY AUTHOR

# Define the book. Protect the work.

These four checks apply whichever publishing route you choose.

## ☐ 01 Set the scope and define success.

Write down your intended reader, genre or subject, word count or page count, and first publication format. Decide what this book needs to accomplish: a family keepsake, a specialist resource, or a commercial release. Set a spending ceiling and a workable timeline. For a series, identify what this volume resolves and what you can reasonably deliver later.

**Ready when:** I can describe this book, its reader, its goal and its limits in one short brief.

## ☐ 02 Revise to the next real milestone.

For a debut novel, plan to query with a complete, revised manuscript. Many nonfiction projects instead begin with a proposal and sample chapters; check the recipient's requirements. Use outside feedback to address structure and clarity before polishing sentences. Paying for an editor is optional when querying. For self-publishing, plan the editing and proofreading needed for the edition readers will buy. <sup>[1]</sup>

**Ready when:** My material is ready for the specific next step, and I have addressed recurring reader concerns.

## ☐ 03 Show where the book belongs.

Find two or three relevant, reasonably recent comparison titles and explain the shared audience, subject, tone or reading experience. Use them to calibrate expectations about length, presentation and readership. "For everyone" is difficult to act on. For fiction, a series opener benefits from a satisfying arc of its own; describe it as a standalone only if that is true.

**Ready when:** I can name the likely reader and explain why that reader would choose this book.

## ☐ 04 Make a rights and permissions record.

In the U.S., copyright generally begins when original authorship is fixed in a tangible form; registration is a separate step with enforcement benefits. Record who owns the text and art, especially for collaborations. Check permissions or applicable exceptions for quotations, lyrics and images, and licenses for fonts or stock assets. Credit alone does not supply permission. Keep agreements that cover the formats and uses you need. <sup>[2] [3]</sup>

**Ready when:** I have a record of ownership, licenses and any permissions still needed.

## 02 / TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING

# Find the right publishing partner.

An agent represents your interests; a publisher decides whether to acquire the book. Representation does not guarantee a publishing deal.

## ☐ 05 Build a verified shortlist.

Research agents who represent your category and publishers accepting direct submissions. Verify opening status, official channels and relevant clients or books. Agents normally earn commission on deals. The Association of American Literary Agents (AALA) prohibits members from charging reading fees for possible representation or requiring paid editorial services as a condition of representation. Optional editorial help is a separate purchase with no promise of representation. [1] [5]

**Ready when:** Every name on my list has a clear fit and verified submission instructions.

## ☐ 06 Prepare the right query materials.

Follow each recipient's instructions. A fiction query normally introduces the book's title, genre and length, then pitches the central character, conflict and stakes, with relevant comparisons and a brief bio. Prepare the requested sample pages. A synopsis explains the full narrative, including the ending. Nonfiction proposals and illustrated-book submissions need their own format-specific materials. [1] [6]

**Ready when:** My query, synopsis or proposal, and sample pages agree and meet this recipient's requirements.

## ☐ 07 Query deliberately; preserve your options.

Track who received which version, when, and the response. Submit in manageable batches so useful feedback can inform later submissions; follow agency rules and any agreed exclusivity. If traditional publication is your first choice for this manuscript, consider that before releasing it publicly. Prior self-publication can affect interest and eligibility. Disclose the book's history; taking it down does not erase that history. [7]

**Ready when:** I have a submission log and understand the consequences of any public release.

## ☐ 08 Understand the rights you are granting.

List formats, languages, territories, duration and exclusivity. Review royalties, approval powers, future-book restrictions, and any AI or audio permissions. Ask how unused or poorly exploited rights return to you: perpetual ebook or print-on-demand availability can make "in print" misleading. Review the agency agreement's commission, expenses, termination and continuing commissions separately. Have contract questions reviewed before signing. [3] [4] [5]

**Ready when:** I can explain what I keep, what I grant, how I am paid and how the agreement ends.

## 03 / SELF-PUBLISHING

# Publish with a plan.

Self-publishing gives you direct responsibility for the book's quality, costs, availability and long-term upkeep.

## □ 09 Budget the whole publication.

Price editing, cover and interior design, proofs, distribution and promotion. Agree on deliverables, revision rounds, exclusions and access to working files before hiring. Choose print specifications before commissioning finished art; paper, binding and color options may limit the design. Calculate expected income per copy after platform and printing charges. High royalty percentages alone tell you little about profit. [11]

**Ready when:** My costs and expected margin are written down, and the budget is affordable even if sales are low.

## □ 10 Choose platforms, licenses and identifiers.

Keep control of your publishing accounts, payment details and master files. Read each platform's rights grant and exit terms. KDP Select adds 90-day Kindle ebook exclusivity, with specified exceptions; print and audio can be distributed elsewhere. Check renewal settings. A free KDP ISBN works only on KDP. Your own ISBN can support your imprint and use elsewhere for the same edition and format. [8] [9] [10]

**Ready when:** I know each format's destination, ISBN needs, exclusivity rules and renewal dates.

## □ 11 Proof the book readers will receive.

Confirm the chosen printer's trim size, margins, bleed and page-count rules. Order a physical proof to inspect color, legibility, binding and cover placement. Check the ebook on different screen sizes, including navigation and accessibility. Proofread after layout, then verify corrections in the final files. Keep title, author, edition and ISBN information consistent across the cover, interior and product listing.

**Ready when:** I have approved the finished print or digital edition and checked its listing details.

## □ 12 Plan discovery and the costs of distribution.

Choose realistic ways to reach readers and measure the results. A distributor listing makes a title available to order; stores and libraries still decide what to acquire. Wholesale discounts reduce your margin. Returns can create charges beyond your earnings, so understand the terms before enabling them. Build voluntary reader signups: selling through a retailer does not give you ownership of its customer data. [10] [12] [13]

**Ready when:** I have a reader outreach plan, a sustainable sales channel and a budget for potential returns.

## 04 / YOUR NEXT STEP &amp; SOURCES

# Turn the checklist into a plan.

Choose the first unchecked item that blocks your next step. Make that the next task; you do not need every possible format, service or marketing channel at launch.

My publishing route:

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The next step I will complete:

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My target date:

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## Sources and further reading

Links support the legal, industry and platform details. The planning prompts are editorial guidance. Sources checked September 6, 2026; recheck terms before submitting, signing or enrolling.

- [1] Penguin Random House. [How Can I Get Published?](#).
- [2] U.S. Copyright Office. [What Is Copyright?](#).
- [3] The Authors Guild. [Model Trade Book Contract: Grant of Rights](#).
- [4] The Authors Guild. [Model Trade Book Contract: Reversion of Rights](#).
- [5] Association of American Literary Agents. [Canon of Ethics](#).
- [6] Jane Friedman. [How to Write a Novel or Memoir Synopsis](#).
- [7] Jane Friedman. [How to Land an Agent for a Self-Published Book](#).
- [8] Amazon KDP. [What Is an ISBN and Imprint?](#).
- [9] Amazon KDP. [How to Enroll in KDP Select](#).
- [10] Amazon KDP. [Terms and Conditions: Rights, Ownership and Customer Data](#).
- [11] Amazon KDP. [Paperback Royalty](#).
- [12] IngramSpark. [Understanding Book Returns](#).
- [13] IngramSpark. [Title Availability: What You Need to Know](#).

U.S.-focused guidance for trade-book authors. This is general publishing education, not a review of an individual contract. Local law, submission rules and platform terms vary. Consult a qualified publishing attorney for contract-specific questions.

Need help deciding what the manuscript needs? Share your genre, word count, publishing goal and the step where you are stuck.

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