

What it means to “self-publish”

The term “**publishing**” refers to the editing, design, production, and marketing of a book. The term “**publisher**” refers to the individual, organization, or company that controls and pays for those activities.

Until recent years, the only high-quality method for producing a “real” book was to use an *offset press* – a high-speed device that transfers an inked image from a plate to a rubber blanket, and then to the multi-page printing surface. Most “traditional” book releases are printed this way, because the process is very fast (books can be mass-produced) and once the press is set-up, the actual cost of printing each book is very low (pennies per copy). However, the plates required to print any given book are extremely expensive to create and set-up initially, so offset printing is only practical when thousands of books will be printed in one press run.

This huge up-front cost is part of why mainstream publishing companies are usually hesitant to take a chance on a new or unknown author. After all, when a new book fails to sell, they lose a *lot* of money.

Authors who are willing to take a chance on themselves (i.e., edit, design, produce, and market their own books) are considered *self-publishers*. Historically, self-publishing involved a highly specialized set of tools and skills that very few authors possessed. So a new form of business, called a subsidy press (or vanity press) emerged. Authors (who could afford to) paid these businesses to handle all or part of the publishing process for them. The author was the “publisher” in the sense that he or she paid for the book to be produced, but the actual *control* of the process was shared with the subsidy press to some degree.

The up-front costs were still sizable. More than a few early self-publishers had to mortgage their homes in order to pay for a minimum quantity of books to be printed. They then had to take delivery of thousands of copies, and work for months to place them in bookstores (which were often reluctant to accept self-published titles). Fortunately, things began to change for the better in the mid-1990s.

In July, 1995 *Amazon.com* opened for business as an on-line bookseller, and has since grown to be the largest on-line retailer in the world. Although exact figures cannot be obtained, most experts estimate that on-line purchases currently account for 20 to 30 percent of all new book sales in the U.S. Further, more than half of Amazon’s book sales come from titles that are not carried by the average retail bookstore. In other words, a book doesn’t have to be “mainstream” to be sold by an on-line bookseller. That gives self-publishers instant access to a huge marketplace.

As Amazon and other on-line retailers were emerging, commercial printers and book manufacturers began to acquire a newly invented technology – the *digital press*. Digital presses operate somewhat like a very high-speed/high-precision laser printer, using a special set of computerized instructions instead of costly plates to produce printed pages. When connected to a finishing unit for book binding and trim, these machines are able to produce quality paperback books in any volume (even just one) quickly and economically.

With the arrival of Amazon and the digital press, it suddenly became more affordable for aspiring authors to self-publish. Yet preparing the computerized instructions for digital printing was still beyond the capability of most – causing a new incarnation of the subsidy press to spring up: the *print-on-demand* (POD) publishing service (also known as a *POD packager*). For a fee, a POD packager would handle the preparation of the author’s manuscript for digital press production, as well as other pre-press functions like cover design – but instead of printing thousands of copies, individual books would be printed on-demand (i.e., one at a time as they were ordered or sold).

Eventually, new desktop tools and software products made it possible for small publishers, freelance designers, and even a few tech-savvy “do-it-yourselfers” to prepare print-ready files for digital press. This reduced the up-front cost and financial risk of self-publishing to nearly zero, and placed the author in *total control* of every aspect of the publishing process except the actual printing of the book.

CreateSpace is a company that operates as both a POD packager and an on-demand book printer. If you have the knowledge and capability to prepare and submit print-ready cover and interior files to commercial specifications, then you can simply use CreateSpace as a printer (and publish your book very quickly and for only a few dollars).

If you don't want to prepare the print-ready files yourself, one option is to purchase a publishing package from CreateSpace – however, it may not be the *best* option for you.

- Package prices are generally higher than “a la carte” custom services from [Lighthouse24](#) would be for the same project.
- POD packagers ask for full payment in advance, whereas [Lighthouse24](#) only requests a 20% deposit (with the balance due when work is completed).
- The average turnaround time for CreateSpace's packages is reportedly two to three months; [Lighthouse24](#) can normally complete a project in one to two weeks.
- CreateSpace outsources the design work associated with their packages (which means you deal with a “go-between” rather than the actual professional who designs your cover and interior pages). You always have direct communication with [Lighthouse24](#).

Newbies often buy package deals, unaware that other (better, faster, more affordable) options exist. CreateSpace can be used as a low-cost on-demand printer (and as a distribution feed to on-line sales channels like Amazon.com), while everything necessary to prepare print-ready files can be done yourself or with a little help from a service provider like [Lighthouse24](#).