

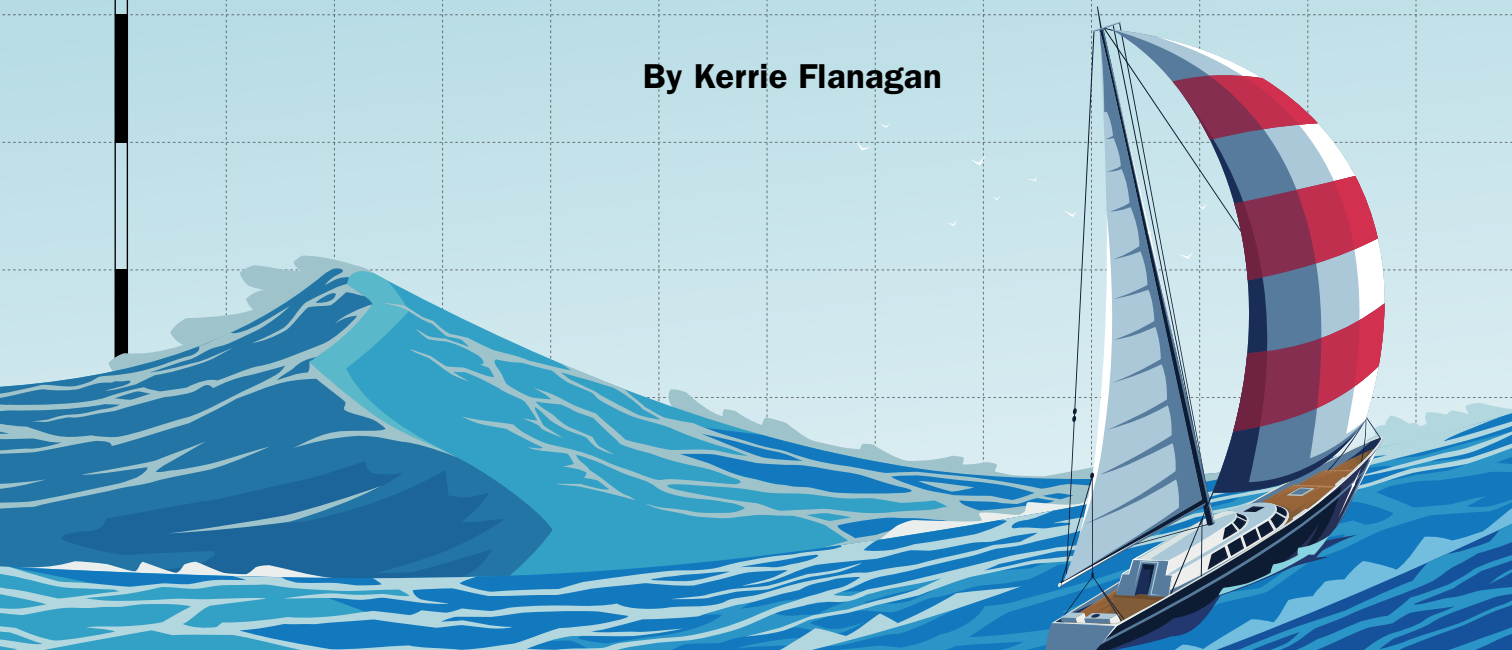
NAVIGATING

THE WIDE WORLD OF

*Self-
Publishing*

*(WITHOUT GETTING LOST
ALONG THE WAY.)*

By Kerrie Flanagan

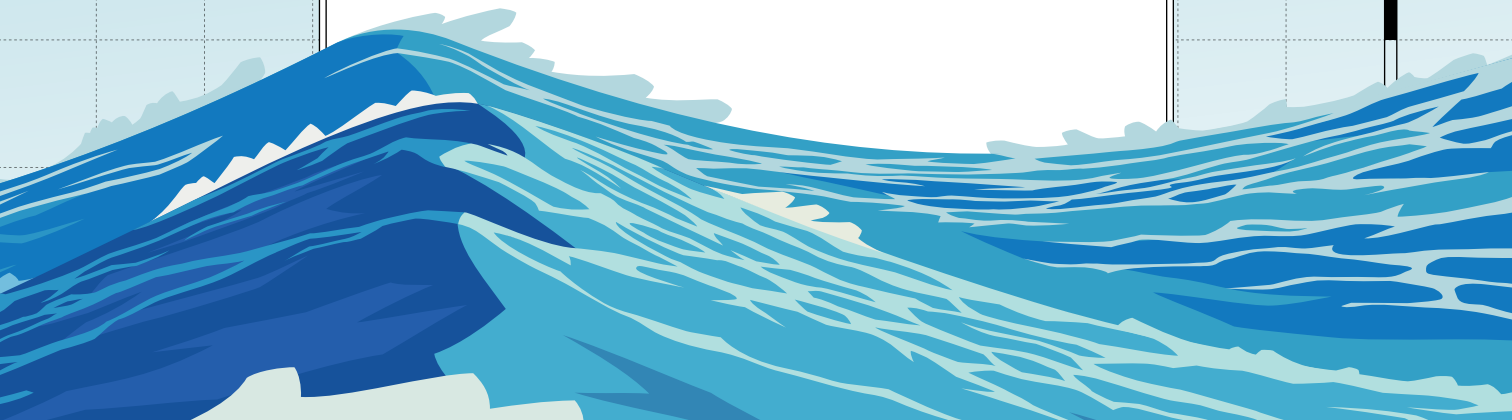


You have dreamed of being a self-published author. Hooray! But finding the way forward in the massive world of self-publishing can be daunting, to say the least. There are so many resources, platforms, opinions, and options, it can make you feel like you have just landed on this massive island, maps in hand, with no idea which direction to go first. You've heard you should start building an author platform, *and* you should have a website *and* be on social media, *and* you have no idea about formatting a book *and* what print on demand is...and the list goes on.

Relax. Believe it or not, there is a way to traverse this self-publishing world without getting lost or too distracted along the way. Consider me your tour guide, and follow as I lead you through this new territory.

Our adventure includes three stops:

- 1. WRITING SANCTUARY**
- 2. PUBLISHING SECTOR**
- 3. MARKETING METROPOLIS**



Writing Sanctuary

For the most part, writing is a solitary venture. It is important you honor this time of creativity and not leave the sanctuary or let people in too soon. Settle in, hang out with your muse, and focus on getting the words out.

FICTION

Good story

Fiction (as well as creative nonfiction, such as memoir, which reads like fiction) is built on a foundation of solid storytelling. Without a good story, nothing else matters. Steven James, author of *Story Trumps Structure*, believes there are four vital elements of effective storytelling. **Believability** – if readers don't buy it, they won't stick with the story. **Causality** – everything that happens needs to be caused by what preceded it, not by chance or coincidence. **Escalation** – the tension will rise throughout the story to an unforgettable climax. And, finally, **surprise** – predictability is a plot flaw, so while keeping things believable, it's important to keep them moving in an unexpected direction."

During this initial writing stage, if you concern yourself too much with the structure, it may bog you down. James says some people let formulas dictate the shape of their stories. "Readers don't care about how many acts a story has. They care about how impactful it is. So, when focusing on your story, really dive into the character's desire and pursuit – what they want and how they go about getting it."

Follow conventions of genre

There are certain norms that readers expect when it comes to their favorite genres. It's up to you to understand what those are. This doesn't mean you

have to follow a set formula, but you need to know what expectations readers might have with their favorite types of stories. In a mystery, for example, readers expect the mystery to be solved; in a thriller, the hero/heroine makes it out alive; in a fantasy novel, there is magic; and in romance, readers trust authors to provide a "happily ever after" ending (or at least a "happily for now" ending). If you label your book as romance and kill off the love interest in the final chapter, readers will be (understandably) upset. Upset readers leave bad reviews, and bad reviews certainly don't sell books, especially self-published ones. These readers will also be hesitant to pick up a book from you in the future because you've broken their trust. Always know the norms of the genre you're working in and ensure your story will fulfill readers' expectations.

NONFICTION

Although general nonfiction can include storytelling, the focus is typically on a certain topic: how to write for magazines, living your best life, the secrets to being a successful entrepreneur. Readers pick up a general nonfiction book to learn something.

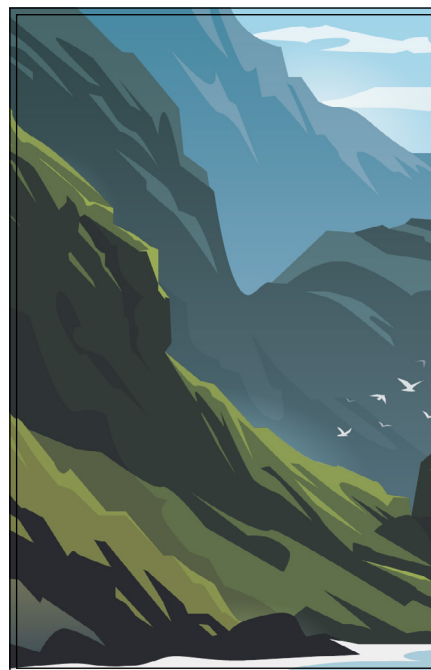
Research

Nonfiction relies heavily on research. You may be an expert on the topic – that's likely why you've chosen to self-publish on the subject – but you'll

still need to weave in statistics, other experts' insights, and current events to strengthen and support your expertise even more. Cross-check any information you find in your research and use primary sources (documents, images, or experts who provide firsthand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic) whenever possible. Also, even though your book is self-published, you'll still need to cite your sources in a bibliography or throughout the manuscript. You may even eventually want to hire a fact-checker to ensure everything you've found in your research can be verified by another party.

Organize

Once your research is completed, organize your information. An outline is a great tool for putting all the pieces together for your book. Grouping information into sections makes it easier for readers to process. Plus, when writing, it allows you to think of your massive



PREVIOUS SPREAD: ILLUSTRATION/SHUTTERSTOCK



manuscript in smaller parts, making the writing process feel less overwhelming.

For me, a nonfiction book is like a big puzzle. There are many tiny pieces that must fit together to complete the big picture (your book), and moreover, you have collected more information, research, and knowledge than you will need to complete the puzzle. Pull out only the necessary pieces and put them together in a way that makes sense and flows for readers.

REVISION AND FEEDBACK

Once you have written your first draft, it is time to go back through and fine-tune it. At this point in the process, it's time to move out of isolation and invite others into the Writing Sanctuary who are willing to provide feedback and suggestions on your manuscript.

Critique groups/writing buddy

It's almost impossible to measure your

It's almost impossible to measure your content's quality in a vacuum, so seek constructive feedback from a trusted writing colleague or critique group.

content's quality in a vacuum, so seek constructive feedback from a trusted writing colleague or critique group. They will see things from a different perspective, catching mistakes or rough patches involving plot, characters, storyline, pacing, etc. Keep an open mind to hear what they say, but remember this is *your* work, so you ultimately have the final decision on what you want to change or rework. If you disagree with a suggestion, there is no need to get defensive; just say, "thanks, I'll consider that."

Self-editing

When you go back through your manuscript to revise, go big to small. First do a readthrough where you are looking at the big picture: overall story arc, flow, character growth, concepts, themes...After you go through it, you may still feel it is missing something or needs more, but you are unsure what that is. If this is the case, consider hiring a developmental editor who focuses on these big-story items or presentation of information for nonfiction. Molly McCowan, founder of InkBot Editing, says the best developmental editors deliver honest, direct, and respectful feedback while collaborating with you to plan out your revision, so it's as effective and streamlined as possible.

The next step is to go back through again to refine and tighten at the sentence level. Look for sentences in passive voice, repeated words, vague words (like really, very, actually), and crutch words. Programs like AutoCrit, ProWritingAid, and Grammarly are available to help to streamline this process.

At this point, I always recommend you hire a copy editor to do a final readthrough. It is exceedingly difficult to see our own mistakes, especially once we've read a manuscript so many times, and readers deserve and expect the books they buy to be free of typos, misspellings, and grammatical errors.

Occasionally one or two may get past your hired editor (which happens with big publishers as well), and readers will forgive those ultra-rare missteps. But too many mistakes will cause them to stop reading, leave a bad review, and/or swear off future books from you entirely. Hiring a professional editor ensures your book will be as professional as possible and shows your readers you value their time too much to waste it with distracting errors.

How to hire an editor

McCowan says the first step to finding the right editor for your manuscript is to seek out editors who specialize in the type of editing you need and who love working in your genre. “I recommend using a free database, such as the Editorial Freelancers Association’s member directory, which lets you search thousands of editors by their services, genres, location, and even the software they use. Visit their websites to get a feel for what they offer, how experienced they are, and what their personality is like.”

Create a list of the editors who fit what you are looking for, then reach out to them. If they offer a free consult or sample edit, take them up on that. McCowan suggests you pay attention to these things:

- What is their communication style?
- Are they friendly and professional?
- Are they direct and perhaps too forceful?
- Do they prefer to keep in touch throughout your project (email only, phone calls)?
- What do the project timeline and steps look like?
- What will you receive at the end of the project?
- Are their fees within your budget?

When you have a short list of editors you are interested in, ask them for a project estimate or proposal. Choose the one who fits within your budget and has a personality and communication style you can work with.

Beta and sensitivity readers

Once you’ve sought feedback from other writers, enlist the help of beta readers willing to do a readthrough to see if there were errors missed or any big

holes in the story. Typically, these are volunteers who agree to read through the book.

If your book includes subjects or characters who are outside your life experiences, you should consider finding a sensitivity reader. These are readers who look for stereotypes, bias, misrepresentation, cultural inaccuracies, and problematic language, and they should always be paid for sharing their time and expertise.

Publishing Sector

With the book now done, it’s time to pack up and travel to the Publishing Sector, where you will get the book ready to release. This section features many side roads and bunny trails; stay close, so you don’t get lost.

COVER

Fact: Readers *do* judge a book by the cover. And since shopping in the self-publishing world is largely done online, this means your cover needs to look great even as a thumbnail. The colors, the font, and the design of your cover should create a mood and tone that reflect the content of your book as well as the current trends for covers in your genre.

A high-quality cover signals to readers that the content inside is also high quality, while a poor cover sows doubts in their minds. A cover is vital to a book’s success and absolutely worth the time and money to create the best one possible. If you are not a graphic designer by trade, I highly

recommend you hire a professional to create your cover.

FORMATTING (PRINT AND EBOOK)

The Publishing Sector is constantly changing and evolving. Back in the day (which, in the fast-paced publishing world, was about three years ago), there weren’t many options for formatting the interior of your book. The great news is, this has changed. With all the tools available now, there is no reason not to have a professional-looking book interior. Just like a poorly done cover, bad formatting signals to readers that you don’t value them enough to provide them with a high-quality product.

Until you do it a few times, the formatting process can feel tedious. (Hang in there, it does get easier.) Print books require a PDF file to be uploaded to platforms, whereas eBooks allow for a few options (DOC or EPUB file). The challenge with formatting is usually in the eBook files, not the print ones, simply because there are so many devices people use to read their books nowadays: phones, tablets, e-readers, and computers. The file must be able to adapt to each device, and that's where formatting problems tend to arise.

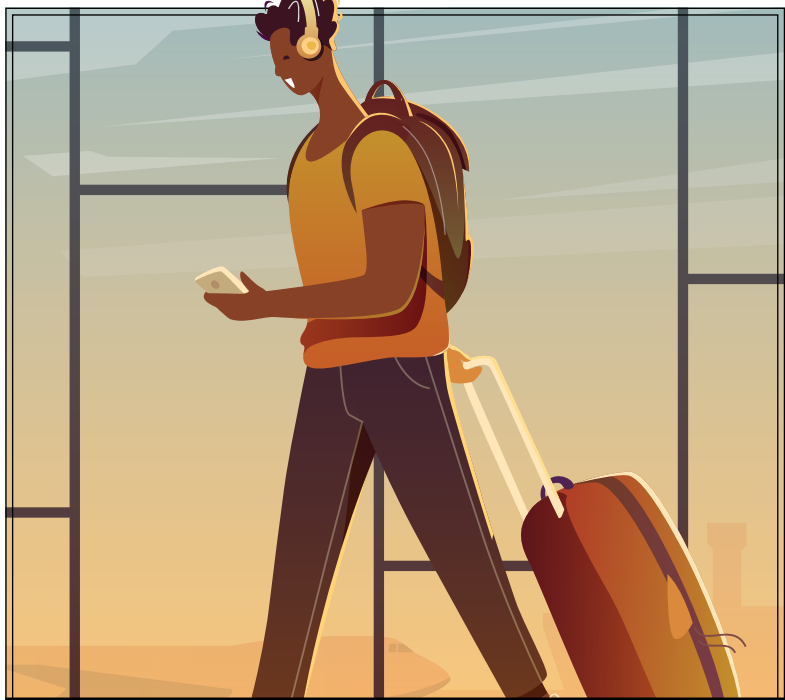
For novels and books with mostly text, there are programs available to purchase like Vellum (only available for Macs) and Atticus that will create professional-looking print and eBook files. There are also free tools available through Draft2Digital and PublishDrive. Each of these programs allows you to upload a Word document and then work within the program to make adjustments.

For graphic-heavy books like photography books, nonfiction with lots of tables and graphs, or cookbooks, these programs won't work as well. A program like Adobe InDesign is great for this, if you have it. Otherwise, you might consider hiring a graphic designer.

PLATFORMS AND DISTRIBUTION

Understand eBook and POD platforms (ISBN)

Beyond digital eBooks, printing self-published books is also an option. Print on demand (POD), which includes paperback and hardcover books, changed the self-publishing game entirely because there's no need to have an inventory of physical books on hand to take orders from customers. You upload your files to one of the primary platforms used for POD, such as Amazon's



AUDIOBOOKS

Audiobooks continue to rise in popularity. They are a bigger investment, but for established indie authors who have a solid readership, there are definite benefits to releasing an audiobook simultaneously with your eBook. If you want to pursue this, great options are available. Findaway Voices, a platform for worldwide retail, library, subscription, and direct sales distribution, recently launched its Marketplace, which connects authors with narrators, and it guides you through the process of creating your audiobook. ACX (a branch of Audible) is another option. Its distribution is limited to Audible, Amazon, and Apple.

Record your own

For authors who want more control over the production of their audiobooks, there is the DIY option. Studios like Ngano Press Studios or Literati Audio are available to help you through the process. You can hire a narrator, and the studio will record, edit and prep the file for you to upload to a platform like Findaway Voices or ACX, which will then distribute it. If you want to narrate it yourself, they will help you do that as well. For the four audiobooks my co-author and I did, we hired a narrator and worked with a studio, then uploaded the files to Findaway Voices for distribution.

KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing), Draft2Digital (D2D), or IngramSpark. When someone orders your book, it is printed “on demand” and sent to the customer. KDP and D2D offer free uploads for your books, and IngramSpark charges \$49.

There are even more options for eBook distribution. You can set up accounts to sell directly through KDP, IngramSpark, Apple, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo, or you can use a one-stop-shop eBook distributor like D2D, where you upload your file at no cost, and it makes the book available on all eBook platforms, including libraries and other subscription services.

Each distribution platform takes a small percentage from each sale, and the remainder of the royalties go to the author.

Bookstores

Many authors dream of seeing their books on the shelves of bookstores. If you have the same dream, you first need to understand how bookstore inventories are managed in order to decide whether or not you want to put the time and energy into marketing your indie books to stores where traditional publishers still dominate.

When a bookstore places an order for a book, it goes through a big distributor, such as Ingram, where stores can buy the books at a wholesale rate (typically 40% to 55% off the retail price). They then sell the books for the retail price and make a profit. Books that don't sell are sent back to Ingram or destroyed.

If you want your books to be available in bookstores and libraries, you need to have them available through a distributor. Ingram allows indie authors to do this through IngramSpark. Next, your book needs to be discounted by at least 40%, and it is also encouraged to make your book returnable.

Granted, this doesn't mean every Barnes & Noble across the country is going to stock your book; it only means it is now *available* for them to buy or for customers to special order. Making your book returnable means that if it doesn't sell at the store, it will be returned to you, and *you* are charged for the shipping. Because of the large discount you need to offer, you may not make a big profit on each book...and if it is shipped back at your expense, you may even lose money.

Independent bookstores are more open to stocking books from indie authors. If it is available through Ingram, stores can order it through there; others offer consignment programs where they will stock your book, and if it sells, you get paid your 60% of the sale, and the bookstore keeps 40%. Stores that offer this program typically keep your book

Independent bookstores are more open to stocking books from indie authors.

on the shelf for a couple of months; some also charge consignment fees.

Libraries

Just because libraries offer their books free to patrons, it doesn't mean authors don't earn royalties for the books the library buys. According to the Institute of Museum and Library services, libraries spend \$1.4 billion each year on books for their catalogs – and this includes eBooks, which are offered as downloads on a library website. IngramSpark and Draft2Digital distribute eBooks and paperbacks to libraries, but KDP does not have this option.

'Wide' vs. 'exclusive'

There is a lot of talk in the self-publishing world regarding making eBooks “exclusive” with KDP, which means you cannot have them available to distribute on other platforms. When opting to be exclusive, authors have the opportunity to make their eBooks available in Amazon's Kindle Unlimited (KU) monthly subscription program and to run free and countdown deals. Authors are paid royalties based on page views, not book sales. It is still possible to have eBooks on KDP without being exclusive, but you can't be in KU or participate in the promos if your books are available on other platforms.

Some argue that because Amazon is the biggest marketplace for self-published books, why not take advantage of all it has to offer? There are genres, such as romance, that do very well in the KU program. The other side says: why put all your eggs in one basket when you could think about diversifying and expand your reach to other retailers like Kobo and Google Play as well as libraries? There's no clear answer to this question just yet, so research the benefits for your chosen genre to see which strategy might work best for you and your books.

Marketing Metropolis

Our final stop is Marketing Metropolis. With all the hustle and bustle of this particular location, many writers would like to bypass it and head straight back to the Writing Sanctuary. But as we all know, books don't sell themselves. This is a necessary part of the process, and I assure you, it doesn't have to be painful. It's a matter of taking your time, doing the things you enjoy, and being patient with yourself and your progress. Successful self-publishing is a long game. Your book may be two years old, but it is new to the reader who just found it. Follow me, and I'll show you around.

GOALS FOR YOUR BOOK

First stop: goals. What is your purpose for writing and self-publishing your book? Do you want to have it available

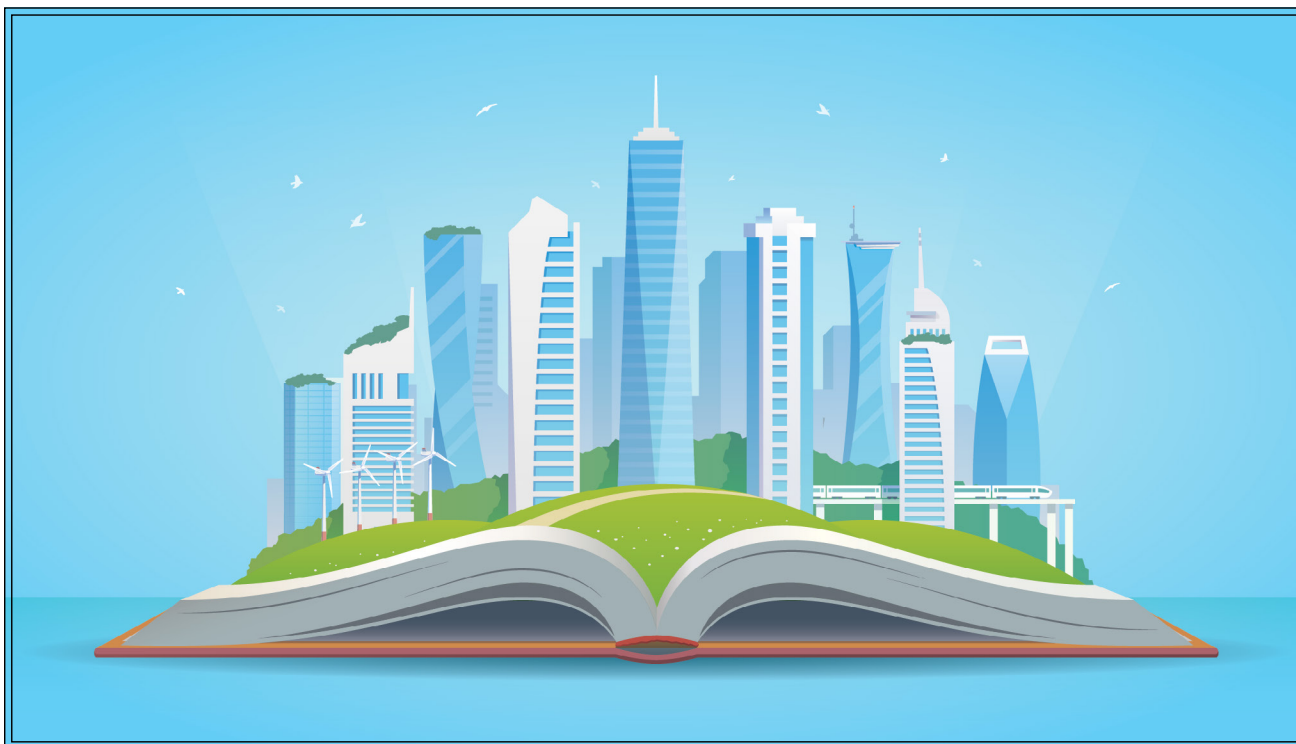
for family and friends? Do you want to continue writing and publishing more books? Do you want to make a career out of it? There is no right or wrong reason, but to help navigate this

world, you need to understand why you are doing it. If your goal is to publish for family and friends, marketing may not be necessary. But if you want to make a nice side income or decent living from your books, then marketing is a necessity.

TARGET READERS

Before starting your marketing journey, understand who you are trying to reach. Your book is not intended for everyone. When Suzanne Collins wrote *The Hunger Games* series, she wrote it with a younger audience in mind. The fact that readers of all ages ended up loving it doesn't change the fact that it was written for the younger market.

Know your reader. How old are they? What are their likes, dislikes? Do they live in a certain part of the world? What social media sites do they hang out on? Where else do they



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hang out (farmers markets? Comic Cons?) And if you write for children, remember that you aren't marketing to them but rather to the adults in their lives (parents, grandparents, teachers, school librarians...) who will ultimately acquire your book for your intended audience. Knowing your reader will guide your marketing choices.

EMAIL MARKETING (PERMISSION MARKETING)

I must confess, I avoided creating a newsletter for the longest time because I assumed it would be too much work, and I would run out of things to share. This has not been the case. I wish I would have done it much sooner with the pen name I write under with my co-author. After two years of actively building our subscriber list and consistently sending a newsletter twice per month, we went from 50 subscribers to nearly 4,000 (and it continues to build). We sell books every time a newsletter is sent.

Email marketing is one of the best ways to build a solid reader base because when they give you their email address, they are giving you permission to reach out to them. Fauzia Burke, author of *Online Marketing for Busy Authors* and a book publicist, agrees that either not having a mailing list or ignoring an existing one is a huge mistake. "An author's mailing list is their single biggest marketing asset," she says.

Platforms

You have options when it comes to finding a newsletter program that works for you and your budget. Some of the more popular ones are Mailer-Lite, Mailchimp, SendFox, and Constant Contact. They allow you to create the newsletters, schedule them, and then see the data, which includes what your readers click on and who opens

the email, so you can learn what your readers respond to.

Build your list

It's not as difficult as you may think to build your list. Consider creating a free "reader magnet," or a piece of content given free to readers in exchange for their email address. This can be the first book in a series, a short story related to your book, or an excerpt. Once you have this, reach out to other authors and see if they'd like to do a newsletter swap with you: They share your book and a link to your reader magnet, and you do the same for them. It's an effective way to reach new readers. The reader magnet allows you to collect the email in exchange for the content. Platforms like StoryOrigin and BookFunnel make it easy to arrange these swaps. Another option is running Facebook Ads with a link to your reader magnet.

Not having a mailing list or ignoring an existing one is a huge mistake.

Burke understands that many authors are uncomfortable with marketing. She says to think of it as a four-ingredient recipe:

1. Start with a website. There are many DIY website platforms out there that require little technical know-how. My favorite DIY website platform for building an author website is called Pub Site, which is made specifically for author websites.
2. Start a mailing list.
3. Give readers a reason to visit your website. You can blog, post videos or short stories, etc.
4. Participate in at least one social media platform to drive traffic to your website where readers can learn about your book.

PAID PROMOTIONS AND ADVERTISING

Paid newsletter and group promotions

You don't have to rely solely on your mailing list to reach readers. Using paid newsletters and group promotions to share your new book, or a reduced price on an older book, is an effective way to increase sales and find new readers. For paid newsletters, you pay to be featured in newsletters sent to targeted mailing lists directed to readers who enjoy specific genres. Group promotions are done through a site like Crave Books, where authors pay to have their books included in giveaways in exchange for the emails of the readers who entered.

Paid advertising

Self-publishing has become more of a pay-to-play venture in recent years. To get attention on Amazon and rise in rankings, paid advertising is essential. For your author Facebook page, it is not enough to just post about your

book; paying to boost those posts or running ads will yield better results. Paid advertising on social media platforms, Amazon, and BookBub are also effective ways to reach new readers. These may seem like a huge undertaking with both time and money, but with the right guidance and information, you can learn to create and manage successful marketing campaigns that drive readers to your books and won't break the bank – and will ultimately yield more profits as a result.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be an effective way to reach and connect with your readers. The key is connection, *not* a stream of sales posts. Interact with your readers and get to know them. One common mistake Burke sees is authors spreading themselves too thin, trying to be on every social media platform, which leads to exhaustion and burnout: “It is better to pick one to two social media platforms and show up consistently with good content.”

USE YOUR STRENGTHS

If you don't enjoy being on social media, there are many other creative options for marketing your book. Think about your strengths and what appeals to you. Do you like the idea of using your writing skills to market? Then start your own blog or be a guest writer on other blogs. Magazine articles are another way because your bio, which has your name, the name of your book, and your website, is included at the end of the piece. Plus, you get to do what you love – write – and hopefully get paid for the piece.

If you are more social and like interacting with potential readers, consider speaking, teaching classes, being a guest on a show (radio, podcast, local

Social media can be an effective way to reach and connect with your readers. The key is connection, not a stream of sales posts.

television, etc.), or getting a booth at a conference or festival. The key is to find activities that excite you. If you force yourself to start using Twitter because you feel you have to, you will not enjoy it – and it will show.

Pick a few activities to focus your time and energy on, and do them well. This will be more effective, and less exhausting, than trying to do everything.

Romance and sci-fi author Carol Van Natta enjoys talking with readers, so she gets booths at comic conventions and applies to be on panels there. These events come in all sizes, from small local gatherings to the big ones, like San Diego and Denver, which are on a much grander scale with more star power. Van Natta enjoys both. “At smaller events, I get more of a chance to spend time with readers and talk about our favorite subject: books. Additionally, I get the opportunity to meet other authors at the other tables and see them on panels.” She says the energy in the vendor hall at the big events could power a small city. “The size of the crowds and the pace means

I meet a large volume of readers over a weekend, plus I get to fangirl over favorite authors and artists.”

Au Revoir

If you are patient, navigating the world of self-publishing does not have to be overwhelming. Take your time while in each area to learn all you can, then implement that knowledge before moving on to the next. You don't have to know everything up front. It's OK to learn as you go. The whole process is exciting and always evolving. Keep an open mind, stay curious, and enjoy the journey. 📖

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*Kerrie Flanagan is an author, writing consultant, and freelance writer from Colorado with over 20 years' experience in the industry. She is the author of WD Guide to Magazine Article Writing. She moonlights in the sci-fi/fantasy realm with a co-author under the pen name C.G. Harris (cgharris.net). For a list of self-publishing resources, visit Kerrie's website: KerrieFlanagan.com*