

Traditional Versus Self-Publishing: What's Best for Your Book?

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Is there a book kicking around in your head? Maybe something in the medical field, or a novel, or a relative's memoir? Many of our fellow AMWA members have written and are selling books. What are *you* waiting for?

Networking

A few months ago, we brought our Kindle with one of our published e-books, *Blood Glucose Levels and Diabetes Control* (Figure 1), and a draft copy of our latest print creation, *Life's Code: How DNA says who we are* (Figure 2), to show-and-tell at an AMWA Chapter gathering in South Florida. After the initial *oohs* and *aahs* upon seeing the books, one of the first questions was, "Did you seek an agent and traditional publisher or go the self-publishing route?" Thus, a most interesting conversation about book publishing options ensued.

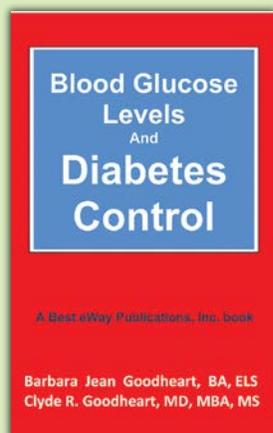


Figure 1. Cover for Diabetes Series, Book 1, Second Edition (print edition)

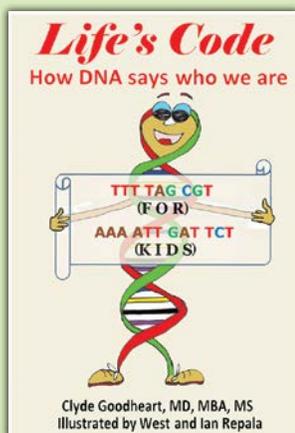


Figure 2. Cover for *Life's Code* (print edition)

So, You Want to Publish a Book?

We understand that the idea of publishing a book can be intimidating. The traditional route can be frustrating: being bogged down, querying agents and publishers, drafting a lengthy book proposal, writing sample chapters, revising, and waiting, rewriting, and waiting again. And often in vain. However, the thought of self-publishing can be just as frightening. We know because we've been there. As a writing team, we have self-published both print and electronic books through Amazon. Before that, we each published our own books the traditional way, through publishers.

Having experience with both options, our bias is toward self-publishing—and it seems we are not alone. Fellow AMWA member Helen Osborne shares our sentiment. When her traditional publisher was bought out, Helen self-published—and she's pleased with the results. "Best of all," she says, "I have full control of the decisions ahead."

Who Knew?

Self-publishing predates Amazon by centuries. In fact, in 1685, Martin Lister, MD, enlisted his 2 daughters as illustrators and self-published a heavily engraved 4-volume work on mollusks and shells, thus keeping control and sidestepping "the expensive commercial route," according to the journal *Science*.¹

Consider This

Things to consider before deciding whether you want to go the traditional publishing route or self-publish include market research, time, royalties, sales and marketing, and control, to name a few.

Before you start writing, you need to do some initial market research to find what's selling in your category.

Amazon updates their titles' sales ranking every hour. We use KDSpy to help us with that task. KDSpy, which you can buy on the Internet, shows the rankings for any category and creates a table that includes the monthly unit and dollar sales. It also indicates keywords in titles. Choose some best-seller keywords for maximum exposure.

When time is of the essence, self-publishing gives you the option to publish electronically. As timeliness is vital, espe-

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cially in the medical field, writing an e-book and uploading it within several months is a win. And if news breaks, demanding a revision, a quick edit is all it takes to give you a new edition in just a few days.

Traditional publishing, on the other hand, doesn't allow for any of this. Traditional publishing typically means wait times of more than a year before publication²—and that's *after* you've written and revised your book. There's undoubtedly no pathway for a quick edit and "repub" should new information come to light. Also, many large publishers are closed to "unagented" work, according to the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. The few exceptions are likely to encounter a wait of anywhere from 1 to 6 months² before they even see the publisher. We're too type A for that!

For example, in June 2018, Clyde had an idea for a children's book. Seven months later, he uploaded the prefinal print version, titled *Life's Code*, distributed proof copies for beta and advance reviews, and planned the upload for sale several weeks later. That's a little over 8 months from concept to market. If he'd wanted an agent or traditional publisher, we'd probably still be looking!

Money, Marketing, and Control

When it comes to royalties, self-publishing wins again. With

Amazon, your royalty is approximately 70%³ on e-books (figured on the difference between the sales price and the few cents Amazon charges for download). With printed books, Amazon subtracts the printing cost (quoted in advance) from the sales price (set by the author), so the author receives approximately 60% of the difference.³

The Nonfiction Authors Association estimates that for a book selling at \$20, traditional publishers pay about \$1.25 per book in royalties.⁴ Contrarily, selling your self-published book at a retail store could fetch you \$5 to \$10 per book, while selling it online could get you as much as \$16! Remember that traditional publishers make money by spending money on the bigwigs. With rare exceptions, other authors don't get significant advances or generous contracts. Some traditional publishers offer up to 15% of the net profit, called *publisher's net*. Others provide the mysterious *percentage of publisher's net*, a term that seems to mean "what's left in the company's budget after bookstore promos and discounts, and wining-and-dining the Grishams."⁵

Another thing to consider is that Amazon doesn't charge for uploading print or e-books. All books are printed on demand. So, no boxes of books in your garage! (But remember, it is essential to buy a proof copy to proofread before you hit the "Publish" button.)

A traditional publisher might offer some marketing hints or spring for a signing or two at a local book store, but unless you're a VIP, marketing is in your hands. Don't be fooled by the "marketing benefits" claims of traditional publishers. You're better off hiring a professional or doing it yourself.

Finally, if you expect control, remember that traditional publishers typically take full control of a book, designing the cover and interior, selecting fonts, and formatting content. Self-publishers who demand control of their work may need to pay a designer or do it themselves. We're not artists, and we created the covers for all our books.

Notwithstanding, when formatting or converting an e-book to print, some writers feel that the Amazon templates result in *look-alikes*. For this reason, we chose to format our books using Word. Word allows you to put the title of the book and the page number on each page as a header, insert images, and set the page (trim) size before you start writing. Then save it as a PDF with embedded fonts (for e-books, save as Web Page filtered), upload to Amazon, and you're done.

If you self-publish, you have complete control. You set the sales price, and you can choose to hire out any part of the process, or you can choose to do it all yourself, but be sure

to have a second pair of eyes review it, such as a professional editor. It's up to you!

Cover Design

A book cover needs to be eye-catching, especially on Amazon, and the title and any key details need to be readable (think thumbnails!). For e-books, Amazon needs only the front cover; for print books, they need both the front and back. Some authors use FIVERR.com to design covers, but for *Life's Code*, we used our great grandkids, who did the cover and all the illustrations—and the results were delightful (Figure 2)!

For the print version of our first diabetes book, we chose a large font and bright colors to make it stand out (Figure 1). For print books, we used the Amazon cover template, customizing it for each book. We entered the trim size and number of pages, which sets the spine width, then downloaded the template. Using Photoshop, we pasted the images for the front and back cover into the template, saved it as a PDF, and we were done. The book is ready to be uploaded.

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HELPFUL SITES

The Amazon website provides step-by-step instructions on self-publishing: https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G202187740.

Specific detailed instructions from KDP:

https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200645680?fbclid=IwAR2MA-U3VLvgFa7WqppImdjYi9Lxnd0liH0W7-DOJiEK2GXL2HYf6bQNVEA.

The Amazon website lists, but does not endorse, service companies for almost everything:

https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G201723120

Amazon also lists many how-to books, with some free e-books:

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=books+on+self+publishing+with+amazon&ref=nb_sb_noss_2.

The Nonfiction Authors Association offers a handy *Self-Publishing Checklist*:

<https://nonfiction.lpages.co/self-publishing-super-simple-checklist/>.

AMWA member Helen Osborne offers her take on self-publishing:

BMI35: *How to Go from Traditional to Self-Published: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Message*:

www.bookmarketingmentors.com/traditional-to-self-published.

Everyday Ethics continued from page 179

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