

PUBLISHING PATHS: 10 ways to share your story



Dayna M. Reidenouer (they/them)

- line/copy editor + proofreader
- book coach
- inclusive language advocate
- Your Publishing BFF

www.YourPublishingBFF.com

Hello! My name is Dayna M. Reidenouer, and I use they/them pronouns.

I live in the ancestral lands of the Conestoga-Susquehannock people, known today as Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

You can find me online as Your Publishing BFF.



Publishing options

2025-2026 KEY BOOK PUBLISHING PATHS • BY JANE FRIEDMAN • JANEFRIEDMAN.COM

BIG FIVE & MID-SIZE		UNIVERSITY & SCHOLARLY		PROFESSIONAL & EDUCATIONAL		SMALLER PRESSES		NO ADVANCE		RIGHTS SALES	
<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Big Five (Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan) and mid-size publishers (e.g., Knopf, Dutton, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, etc.) Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-profile titles get high advances These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing 	<p>what you see</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advances are usually modest but can be high for high-profile titles These publishers expect authors to do the marketing <p>what you receive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> These publishers expect authors to do the marketing

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HYBRID PUBLISHERS		PAID PUBLISHING SERVICES		OTHER PUBLISHING PATHS (NOT TRADITIONAL)		SOCIAL		GRAY AREAS AND CONTROVERSIES	
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<https://janefriedman.com/key-book-publishing-path/>

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Author and publishing expert Jane Friedman has helpfully provided overviews of key book publishing paths since at least 2013.

Her 2025-26 list has ten options. We'll dig into this list later, but if you're like me, making a decision from multiple good options can be challenging.

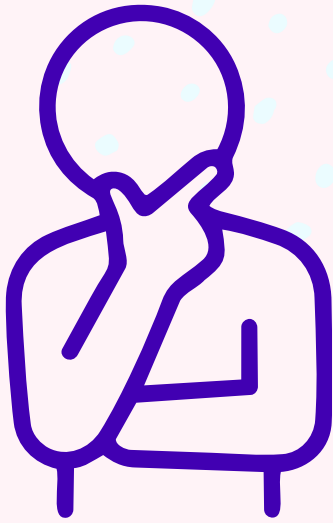
Questions to inform your decision



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That's why I've created questions to help you narrow your options. It's not quite a Cosmo quiz, but I certainly had that concept in mind as I created these!

Write down your answers or keep them in mind as we go along.



**Share my story with
the world**

Publish just for me

www.YourPublishingBFF.com



Why are you considering publishing? What do you want to get out of it? Are you publishing because you have a story the world needs to have? Or are you publishing for yourself, as a way to prove something to yourself or just for fun? There's no right answer.



How do you feel about risk? Risks are inherent in publishing, no matter which path you take.

Publishing is a risky business.

Plagiarism/piracy

Publishing house collapse

Investments and advances don't earn out

Ding to your professional reputation

Waste of time

No one likes your story



Financially flush?

Pinching pennies?

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Yes, you can technically publish free of charge, either traditionally or independently. But even trad authors might have spent money on developmental edits and query package evaluations before submitting to agents.



Move quickly?

Play the long game?



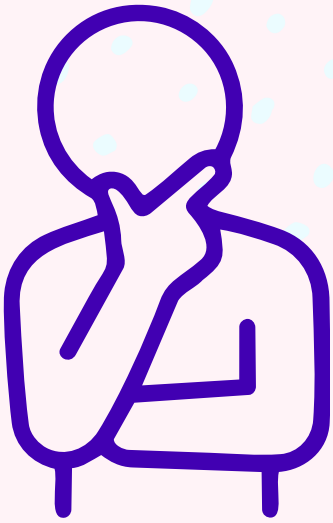


Team player?

Solopreneur?



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Writing short?

Writing long?

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Fast writer?

Slow writer?



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All the social media?

Avoid social media?





Do the work for me

I'll do it all myself

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High-touch reader interactions?

Separation between author and reader?





Marketing maven?

Marketing mess?



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Low-stakes Publishing



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Writing can be fun, low-stress. Doesn't even need to be written down. Storytelling in the oral tradition is totally valid.

Publishing is the act of making your stories, your thoughts, available for others to read.

I'll break down commercial publishing methods, but first, here are some low-stakes publishing methods.

Social proofs



- Publish to Medium, Wattpad, Archive of Our Own, FanFiction.net
- Post stories on Facebook
- Hone concision on Threads + Bluesky
- Share files or links with family + friends
- Upload stories to your personal website

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May include posting to a web site or social media, writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper, or sharing your files with family and friends.

Writing is a passion. Publishing is a business.

author and book promotion strategist LaShaunda Hoffman,
lashaundahoffman.com

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Writing is a passion; publishing is a business, credited to author and book promotion strategist LaShaunda Hoffman

Deciding where and how to publish is a business decision. The type of person you are and how you work best will inform your publishing path.

Publishing options



Traditional – company assumes all risk and makes all decisions

Independent/self – you assume all risk and make all decisions

Hybrid – you assume all risk; press provides advice and guidance or does it for you

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Traditional

Includes the Big Five
Penguin Random House
HarperCollins
Macmillan
Simon & Schuster
Hachette
and small presses

Then there's Independent/self-publishing

And a blend of the two, often called hybrid but also termed "subsidy" because the author subsidizes the press's publishing expenses.

Jane Friedman doesn't like the term "vanity press" because of the inherent judgment.



Traditional Publishing



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It's the OG after all!

Trad publishing myths



[A common misconception of traditional publishing is] that their book will sell FAST. That they'll become rich off the first book. I mean, that CAN happen, but that's certainly not the norm.

[New authors also expect] that their book will be on shelves months after signing the contract.

Publishing is a "hurry up and wait" industry.

Literary agent Lynnette Novak, EasternPennPoints, 2023

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Trad publishing is often seen as the ideal—I mean, what author wouldn't want to be paid five or six figures, see their books in major stores, and become a household name?

The reality is quite different. Gatekeeping and white supremacy are built into the publishing system, and lucrative contracts are rare. And the *time* involved in all steps of traditional publishing is usually misunderstood.

Literary agent Lynnette Novak gave an interview to EasternPennPoints, a publication of the Eastern Pennsylvania chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, in which she said:

A common misconception of traditional publishing is] that their book will sell FAST. That they'll become rich off the first book. I mean, that CAN happen, but that's certainly not the norm.

[New authors also expect] that their book will be on shelves months after signing the contract.

Publishing is a "hurry up and wait" industry.

Reality

payouts for \$25,000 advance

	Gross	Net
3 payments	\$8,333.33	\$4,583.33
4 payments	\$6,250	\$3,437.5



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In 2024, the median advance was \$25,000. But literary agent commissions are usually 15%, and self-employment taxes take 30%.

Advances are usually paid out in thirds or fourths, each about a year apart.

Many books don't earn out, so what you get from your contract – minus agent's fees and taxes – is the maximum you will earn.

The query process



You can expect a TON of rejection and sitting around waiting for things to happen.

Author Olivia Tildon, July 2025

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But you're determined - an important quality for authors - to land that publishing contract, so you'll need a literary agent, except in rare cases or niche genres.

Getting an agent isn't easy, as competition is stiff. Some agents have reported receiving 300 submissions a day.

And then the agent faces competition to sell your book to a publisher.

Both agents and acquiring editors buy books if they see something good and think a title will sell. If your book is rejected, it may not be a question of quality; instead it's about whether it will sell.

An agent recently shared on Instagram insights from industry insiders.

A vice president and executive editor at a Big Five imprint reported receiving 10 submissions a week from literary agents. That's 520 a year. But the imprint publishes only 10 books a year.

An editor at a midsize imprint said they receive 10 to 15 submissions a week from literary agents, and their boss receives twice that. This editor publishes six to seven books a year, with their entire imprint publishing 18 to 24 books a year.

If your query package doesn't grab attention within seconds, your book doesn't stand a chance.

Trad publishing pros & cons

Benefits	Drawbacks
Professional production	Agent typically required
Massive distribution channels	Minimal choice in cover, title, and design
Special privileges with Amazon and other vendors	Minimal marketing support
Publishing house carries all financial risk	Advances paid out over three or four years
You're paid money up front!	No access to competitive pricing

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Vying for an agent and a trad contract might be worthwhile.

Benefits of traditional publishing include professional production, massive distribution channels, and the publishing house taking on all the financial risk. And you get money up front.

Yay! No stressing over who to hire to do the edits or create your covers or illustrations, amirite?

However, you also have to spend time querying. And then wait while your manuscript goes through the editorial process.

And most of the marketing responsibilities will fall on your shoulders.

Publishing houses have been cutting costs and moving away from organizing everything for their authors.

You may also have to hire an editor to help you develop your story or polish your pitches.

Your publisher also controls the prices, and your books typically aren't enrolled in Kindle Unlimited, which means you aren't in front of those voracious readers.



Traditional Responsibilities

**You do most of
the marketing**

**Likely work a
second or third job
to pay the bills**

**Two-income
households**

**Debut authors must
build their readership
from scratch**

**No access to
competitive
pricing**

**Typically can't
use Kindle
Unlimited**

A tradeoff for having everything done for you: most of the marketing responsibilities will fall on your shoulders. Publishing houses have been cutting costs and moving away from organizing everything for their authors.

You may also have to hire an editor to help you develop your story or polish your pitches.

Your publisher also controls the prices, and your books typically aren't enrolled in Kindle Unlimited, which means you aren't in front of those voracious readers.

And if you haven't reached this conclusion yet, trad authors likely work multiple jobs or live in two-income households to support themselves.

Querying tips



Don't query too early

- Do several rounds of self-edits
- Seek feedback from trusted readers in your genre
- Use a developmental editor if possible

Create a strong query letter

- Learn what a query letter needs
- Edit your letter as thoroughly as your manuscript
- Hire a professional if possible

Test your strategy

- Submit to five to ten agents in your genre with quick response rates
- If you don't hear back, rework your query letter
- *Be slow and methodical*

Slow and steady wins the race

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In my mind, "time" and "traditional" are inextricably linked.

If traditional publishing is your goal, remember that "slow and steady wins the race."

Don't query too early.

Create a strong query letter.

Test your strategy

Submit your query package to a few agents known to have quick response rates. If you don't hear back, something's wrong with your query letter, so rework it.

Be slow and methodical, and make small, calculated changes for each batch of queries.

Thanks to Olivia Tildon for collecting the majority of these tips!

Query resources

- [r/selfpub on Reddit](#)
- [Query Tracker](#)
- [Manuscript Wish List](#)
- [Publishers Marketplace](#)
- [A Beginner's Guide to Researching Agents](#)
- [Writer Beware](#)

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Here's a list of resources that will make your querying journey simpler.

Impact of Inflation



- Authors with a Big Five house have seen their earnings decline as inflation has risen over the past six years
- Advances have been cut by more than half since the Great Financial Crisis of 2007–8.”

Chokepoint Capitalism
Rebecca Giblin and Cory Doctorow

And then there’s the impact of inflation.

Authors with a Big Five house have seen their earnings decline as inflation has risen over the past five years

“Advances have been cut by more than half since the Great Financial Crisis of 2007–8.”
Rebecca Giblin and Cory Doctorow wrote in *Chokepoint Capitalism*

Hybrid publishing



- Jane Austen used a self-pay press for *Sense and Sensibility*, 1811
- May require upfront payment of \$5,000 or more
- Watch out for added costs or service upsells
- Writer Beware!

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Hybrid publishers are similar to trad publishers in that they generally have an application process, put their own names on your books, and pay author royalties, but unlike trad publishers, hybrids require authors to pay for publishing.

Subsidized, or self-pay presses, like the one Jane Austen used in 1811 to print *Sense & Sensibility* when no publisher would buy it from her, make their money from the author, not from book sales.

Hybrid publishers also tend to require authors to pay up front for their services, and what looks like a valuable package deal may actually cost you more money. Read your contract closely, looking for hidden fees or loopholes. Budget for legal reviews with a literary, entertainment industry, or contract attorney.

Victoria Strauss's wealth of insight at *Writer Beware* is of utmost importance. Always check *Writer Beware* before you sign a contract with a publishing or marketing entity.



Independent Publishing



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Trad and hybrid not for you? Consider independent publishing.

More than just writing



“Writing a good book and honing your craft is at most 40%–50% of chasing career longevity when you factor in all the business stuff.”

Noah Steele, author, Dec. 2023

“If you want to publish, you can. The industry never closes. ... [but] you must be willing to play the long game.”

Becca Syme, webinar, Fall 2023

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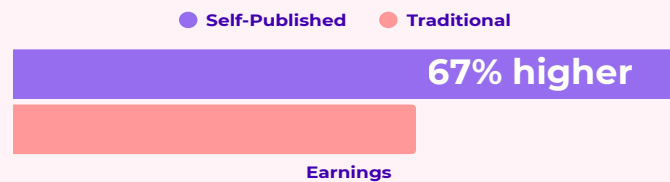
Self-publishing authors need to think clearly and carefully about where they’ll spend their time and energy. It’s not as simple as writing a book, uploading it to Amazon or another vendor, and waiting for the money to roll in.

“Writing a good book and honing your craft is at most 40–50% of chasing career longevity when you factor in all the business stuff.”

Author Noah Steele said in December 2023.

“If you want to publish, you can. The industry never closes. ... [but] you must be willing to play the long game,” writer consultant Becca Syme said in Fall 2023.

Indie income



Authors Guild's 2023 Author Income Survey

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OK, so you want to retain control and publish on your own schedule. Independent publishing might be for you.

The introduction of e-readers in 2007 and the digitization of credit cards decentralized publishing. With Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, authors could take their books directly to readers, cutting out traditional publishers. Millions of books are available, with writer consultant Becca Syme noting at the end of 2023 that the ratio of purchased books to books in catalogue was one to 288. That number has grown exponentially. Readers have a glut of choice.

Finding readers is difficult, and this summit offers excellent resources to make your efforts more effective. Before you get too discouraged, remember that debut authors in traditional publishing need to create their own readers too.

And although initial income is skewed toward trad thanks to advances, over the long term, indie authors are making bank.

The Authors Guild's 2023 Author Income Survey reported that full-time self-published authors earned at least 67% more than trad authors through book sales alone.

Typically, if a self-pubbed author can hit the five-year mark in the business, they're likely to out-earn their trad counterparts.

Of genre importance



“Though overall author incomes are still low, experienced self-published authors have nearly doubled their earnings since 2018 with the help of effective marketing efforts. Authors of romance and romantic suspense are still out-earning other genres, with graphic novelists coming in a close second. In addition to book sales, author-related activities bring in a significant portion of those incomes.”

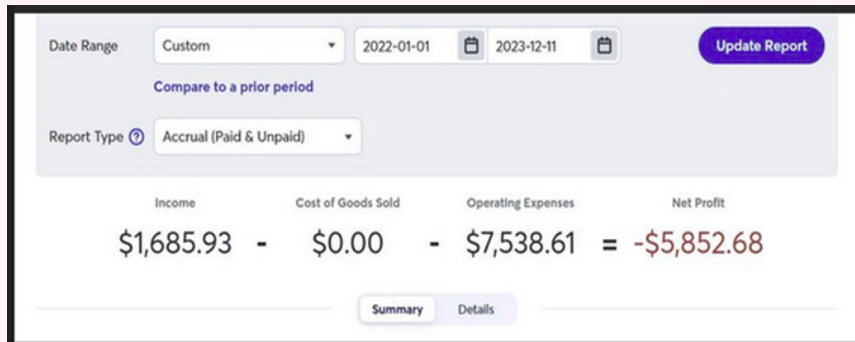
Authors Guild’s 2023 Author Income Survey

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Genres also make a difference on income.

“Though overall author incomes are still low, experienced self-published authors have nearly doubled their earnings since 2018, with the help of effective marketing efforts. Authors of romance and romantic suspense are still out-earning other genres, with graphic novelists coming in a close second. In addition to book sales, author-related activities bring in a significant portion of those incomes.”

Count the cost: self-publishing



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But while indie publishing might not require an outlay of \$5,000 or more right up front like a hybrid or self-pay press might charge, you can easily spend that much or more to produce a book.

Romance author Elaina Lyons shared her balance sheet in December 2024. She'd had nearly \$1700 of income over the two years she tracked her book, but her outgoing expenses were about \$7,500, a net profit of negative \$5,800.

Count the cost: self-publishing

Publishing costs (rough estimates)			
Editing			
Developmental	\$2,000	Cover design	\$100-\$500
Beta reading	\$500	Formatting	\$100
Line editing	\$1,000	ISBN codes	10/\$295 or 1/\$125
Copy editing	\$1,000	U.S. Copyright filing	\$45-\$65
Proofreading	\$800	Advertising	\$5-10,000/day
Total Editing	\$5,300		
		TOTAL COST	\$6,250+

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Let's break down Elaina's \$7500. To create a quality book, you need to invest in quality products and services, ensuring you're paying your providers a living wage. Elaina's operating expenses likely included many of the following publishing costs:

Publishing costs (rough estimates)

Editing

Developmental (\$2,000)

Beta reading (\$500)

Line (\$1,000)

Copy (\$1,000)

Proofreading (\$800)

Cover (\$100-500)

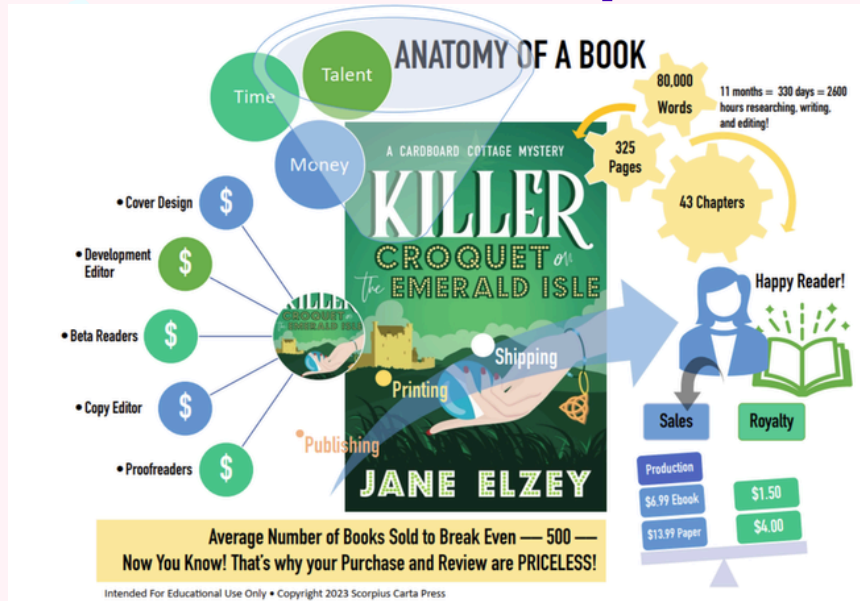
Formatting (\$100)

ISBN codes (10 for \$295 or 1 for \$125)

U.S. Copyright filing (\$45-65)

Advertising (\$5-10,000/day)

Count the cost: self-publishing



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To show what went into the production of her book, "Killer Croquet on the Emerald Isle," mystery author Jane Elzey created this graphic.

Publishing involves three major resources: time, talent, and treasure.

Jane spent 2,600 hours researching, writing, and editing.

She then paid for multiple editors and a cover designer.

When she calculated her royalties, she needed to sell 500 electronic and print copies to break even.

Business advice



You might be able to DIY it for cheap, but you're costing yourself the results you want.

Ally Machate, The Writer's Ally, January 2024

- Making money requires investing money
- Create the very best marketable product you can
- Your time is valuable; hiring a professional may be more cost-effective than trying to do it yourself
- Free or low-cost books must be part of your strategy
- Build your newsletter
- Consider subscriptions like Patreon and Substack
- Readers will buy more from an author they like if more is available.
- Usually takes three to four books before an indie author will see an exponential growth in their sales.

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"You might be able to DIY it for cheap, but you're costing yourself the results you want," Ally Machate of the Writer's Ally said last year.

Making money requires investing money.

Create the very best marketable product you can.

Your time is valuable; hiring a pro may be more cost-effective than trying to do it yourself.

Free or low-cost books must be part of your strategy.

Build your author newsletter.

Consider subscriptions like Patreon and Substack.

Readers will buy more from an author they like if more is available.

It usually takes three to four books before an indie author will see an exponential growth in their sales.

Keep in Touch



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You can send those links to me at hello@YourPublishingBFF.com, learn more about my business and me at YourPublishingBFF.com, and follow [@YourPublishingBFF](https://www.instagram.com/YourPublishingBFF) on Instagram and Threads.

Remember, life's too short for beige books!