Inside Publishing

What Every Business Author Needs to Know
Before Choosing a Publishing Route

TARYN LEE JOHNSTON

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INTRODUCTION

Having been in publishing for over fifteen years now, I have had many conversations regarding publishing and the options available to authors.

I have also, sadly had many conversations with authors who have regretted the route they took, whether with a traditional publisher or having been caught out by a less ethical company.

One of the things that annoys me immensely is when an author doesn't feel the sense of pride and happiness they should on release day because their journey to published author has been fraught, dragged out or downright unpleasant. This, in my opinion, should never be the case. When you've taken the time to write something important to you, the published book should be a celebration of that.

Hopefully the following pages will provide guidance, it's the same, honest information I give anyone who speaks to me and should steer you in the right direction.

If you are in a place where you are unsure or unhappy about your publishing process, please reach out, I don't promise I can fix it, but I will always offer clear advice where I can.

Taryn

"There are three difficulties in authorship: to write anything worth publishing, to find honest men to publish it, and to find sensible men to read it."

– Charles Caleb Colton

PART ONE

THE TRUTH ABOUT PUBLISHING COSTS

The first thing most aspiring authors learn about publishing is that they shouldn't pay for it. The second thing they learn, (usually much later and after they've made several wrong decisions), is that they're going to pay for it whatever they do. The only question is how, when, and to whom.

By the time they're sitting across from someone like me, the idea that publishing involves paying anything feels suspicious, slightly grubby, and probably a sign that something has gone wrong.

This book is largely about closing the gap between the first thing and the second thing.

I'm going to spend this first part of the book explaining why that belief is no longer correct, why it may have been twenty years ago, and what the modern reality actually looks like for an author trying to publish a book in 2026. It's the foundation for every decision you'll make about your book, so it's worth getting straight before we go any further.

Publishing Is Never Free

Whichever route you take to publication, your book is going to cost something. The variables are when you pay, how you pay, what you give up in exchange, and who keeps the long-term value of the work. There is no version of publishing in which a finished, professionally produced book reaches readers without significant money and time being spent somewhere along the way.

If you go the traditional route through one of the big six publishers, you don't pay upfront. Instead, you give up most of the royalties on every copy sold for the life of the book, which can be decades. You also give up creative control over the editing, the cover, the title in some cases, the marketing, and the publication timeline, you may even give up the copyright to your work, in a world where IP matters, this is a considerable cost. The publisher pays the production costs, but they recoup those costs many times over from the royalties they keep. You're paying for the publication, you're just paying for it slowly, out of every sale, forever.

If you go the independent route through a smaller publisher, you contribute to production costs upfront in exchange for keeping a significantly higher share of the royalties, retaining more control over the book itself, and having a much closer working relationship with your publisher. The costs are transparent and can be written off as a legitimate business expense. You pay early, but you keep more of what the book generates afterwards.

If you self-publish, you pay for everything yourself. Editing, formatting, cover design, ISBN registration if you want one, distribution setup, marketing. If you bring in professional service providers to do each of these properly, the total cost usually comes out higher than working with an independent publisher, because you're paying retail rates for each piece individually and you don't have the buying power that comes from a publisher's existing relationships. The only way self-publishing genuinely costs less is if you skip the professional services and do most of the work yourself, which is the route that produces the books that look amateur, regardless of how good the writing is.

The point of this opening section is straightforward. Publishing your book will cost you. That cost might be financial, time-based, or take the form of giving up most of your royalties, but it will exist. Choosing a route is a question of which combination of those costs suits your specific situation and your specific book.

Why "You Shouldn't Pay for Publishing" Is Out of Date

The argument that authors should never pay anything towards publishing comes from a specific moment in the industry that no longer exists. Twenty years ago, traditional publishers took on a much higher proportion of new authors. They were willing to invest in unknown writers because the economics of the industry allowed it. Books cost more relative to the cost of producing them, the volume of books being published each year was a fraction of what it is now, and major publishers had the budget to take chances on debut authors with no existing platform.

Several things have changed since then.

The number of books published each year has exploded. In the UK alone, more than 200,000 new titles are published annually, and that's before you count the millions of self-published books going onto Amazon every year. The market is properly saturated, which means any individual book has a much harder time getting noticed than it did two decades ago.

The cost of producing books has risen significantly. Paper, printing, distribution, warehousing, all of it has gone up. Editorial staff costs more. Marketing costs more. The production line is more expensive than it used to be.

The price of books has not risen to match. A hardback that cost £20 fifteen years ago still costs around £20 today, even though everything required to produce it has become more expensive. Publishers' margins have been squeezed for years.

The combined effect is that traditional publishers can afford to take on far fewer authors than they used to, and the ones they do take on need to come with a properly bankable proposition. That usually means an existing platform of significant size, a track record of selling something to a defined audience, or a book idea so commercially obvious that the publisher can see the path to recouping their costs before they sign.

For a debut business author with a useful book and a reasonable LinkedIn following, the path to a traditional deal is not closed in principle. It is just very narrow, and the publishers will look hard at your platform before they take the risk.

Publishers are running businesses in a market where the economics have made them more cautious, and that's a rational response to the conditions they face. But the implication for authors is significant. The era when traditional publishers could absorb the full cost of producing books across a wide range of authors is over. The economics have shifted to a place where authors are increasingly expected to contribute, whether through their existing platform, their own marketing efforts, or a direct financial contribution to production costs.

What's interesting about the "you shouldn't pay for publishing" argument is who it actually gets aimed at. It's almost never directed at the big traditional publishers, even though they're extracting cost from authors through royalty structures that go on for decades. The criticism gets reserved for independent publishers, who are accused of being vanity operations the moment they ask authors to contribute to production costs. The prestige of the traditional imprint protects it from scrutiny. The independent publisher doing genuinely good editorial work gets lumped in with the vanity press because the financial models look superficially similar from the outside.

This irritates me because it produces a strange situation where authors are encouraged to chase traditional deals that are statistically very unlikely to come, while being suspicious of the independent publishers who would actually take their book seriously, produce it properly, and build a real working relationship with them.

The authors who keep insisting that "real publishing" means the publisher pays for everything are usually working from a version of the industry that hasn't existed at scale for at least a decade. Traditional deals still happen, particularly for books that are unusually strong or original, and if your book is one of those, the traditional route is worth pursuing properly. The mistake isn't believing traditional deals exist, but that assuming yours will be one, and treating the contribution-based alternatives with suspicion when they're often the more realistic and more useful route for the specific book you're trying to write.

Paying for Publishing Versus Contributing to Costs

This is the distinction that matters most and the one that causes the greatest confusion. It's the difference between vanity publishing and legitimate independent, partnership or hybrid publishing, and getting it right protects you from making expensive mistakes.

Vanity publishers charge you to publish your book. The fee covers their production costs plus their profit margin, and they accept your manuscript because the fee is the business model. There's no editorial threshold. Almost any manuscript will be accepted. The publisher is not investing in your book because they think it's good, they're producing it because you've paid them to.

Independent and hybrid publishers ask you to contribute to specific production costs. Those costs are the work your book actually needs to become a finished product. Professional editing, proofreading, formatting and cover design. These services cost money whichever route you take, and an independent publisher offering them at fair rates is asking you to cover what they cost rather than charging you for the privilege of being published.

What the independent publisher covers themselves are the publishing costs, as distinct from production costs. ISBN registration, distribution setup through the major channels, the time spent loading your book onto platforms, building it into their catalogue, sending out review copies, and maintaining the administrative infrastructure of having your book in print over years. These are publishing costs and they're absorbed by the publisher because the publisher's business is publishing.

The litmus test is simple. If a publisher accepts your manuscript without any editorial assessment and asks you to pay a single fee that covers everything, that's vanity publishing. If a publisher assesses your manuscript, decides whether it meets their editorial standards, and then asks you to contribute to the specific production costs your book requires, that's independent or hybrid publishing.

The difference is whether the editorial standards exist. Vanity publishers will produce any book. Independent publishers will only publish the ones they're prepared to put their imprint on. The fee structure might look similar from the outside, but the underlying business model is completely different, and the credibility your book gains or loses depends entirely on which model you've actually engaged with.

Why Investment Changes the Author's Behaviour

There's a final point I want to make in this opening section, and it cuts against the conventional wisdom about traditional publishing being the most desirable route.

An author who has contributed financially to producing their book behaves differently from an author who has been picked up by a traditional publisher at no apparent cost. The financial investment creates psychological investment. The author who has paid for proper editing, design and production has skin in the game. They show up to the launch, do the marketing and take the book seriously as a business asset because they have already invested in it.

The author who has been signed by a traditional publisher often makes the opposite assumption. The publisher has taken the risk, so the publisher will do the work. The book will appear in shops, the publisher's marketing team will promote it, the reviews will arrive, the sales will follow. Except in the vast majority of cases, that's not how it works. Traditional publishers expect their authors to do most of the marketing themselves. They expect the author to lean on their existing platform, run their publicity, secure their podcast appearances, and drive their sales. The book is on the shelf, but the work of getting it into readers' hands still falls largely on the author.

An author who has paid for their book mentally treats it as something they need to make work. An author who hasn't paid sometimes treats it as something the publisher will make work for them. The first attitude is far more likely to produce a successful book.

I'm not saying that traditional publishing is worse than independent, far from it. There are cases where traditional is genuinely the right answer, and we'll come to those. My argument is that the apparent benefit of "not paying" can actually undermine the author's commitment to the book's success, while the apparent disadvantage of contributing to costs creates the conditions for the author to do the work the book needs.

In my experience, authors who have invested in their books are the ones who get the doors opening, speaking engagements and consulting work flowing in afterwards. The investment is part of what makes the book work, not just because of the production quality but because of what it does to the author's relationship with the work.

This is the foundation for everything that follows in this book. Publishing is never free. The distinction between paying for publishing and contributing to costs is the most important piece of education in the industry, and the apparent cost of contributing to production is often what creates the conditions for the book to actually succeed.

With that established, we can look at the three main routes available to you and what each one actually involves.

"You are your own brand. Make sure your book reflects that."

– Tim Ferriss

PART TWO

THE THREE ROUTES

There are essentially three routes to getting your book into the world. The traditional route through one of the big six publishers and their imprints. The independent route through a smaller publisher, and self-publishing, where you do it yourself or arrange the services individually.

Each of these has genuine advantages and disadvantages, and to be fair, all three are the right answer for someone. The question is who, for what kind of book, and at what stage of an author's career? The mistake is assuming there's a universally correct answer.

What follows is the overview I would and do give authors that come to me for advice, including the parts most articles about publishing skip over because they're not flattering to the route being recommended.

The Traditional Route

The traditional route means signing with one of the big six publishing houses. Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, Macmillan, Simon and Schuster, or Bloomsbury, plus their various imprints. These are the publishers most aspiring authors picture when they imagine being published, and a deal with one of them is the route most authors say they want when you first ask them. Now, smaller imprints can and do offer traditional deals, but for the sake of this example I'm going with the big houses.

What the trad route actually offers

Reach is the genuine reason to want a traditional deal. The big six have distribution networks no independent publisher can match, relationships with every major bookshop chain, established reviewer connections at the broadsheets, and the budget to put your book in front of audiences other routes can't reach. If your book is suited to mass-market distribution and your goal is to be in Waterstones, WHSmith, supermarkets and airport bookshops, traditional publishing is the only route that delivers at that scale.

Credibility is the second genuine advantage. A book published by Penguin carries assumed quality that a book published anywhere else has to earn. The imprint does work for the author's reputation that the author would otherwise need to do themselves. For a business author whose book is part of building a wider career, that assumed credibility opens doors that contribution-based routes might not.

The in-house marketing is the third reason, although this one comes with significant caveats we'll get to shortly. Traditional publishers have marketing teams, publicity departments, and existing relationships with the people who decide what gets reviewed, featured and recommended. They do some of the marketing work that authors going other routes have to organise themselves. They also have a marketing budget I can only dream of!

The apparent absence of upfront cost is the fourth, although Part One already explained why "apparent" is the word doing the work in that sentence.

What the trad route actually costs you

The royalty structure is the first real cost. Traditional publishers pay authors between 10 and 15 percent of net receipts on print books, sometimes lower on ebook royalties depending on the deal. Over the life of a book that sells reasonably, the author gives up the substantial majority of what the book generates. The publisher took on the production cost, but they're recouping that cost many times over from royalties for decades.

Control is the second cost. The publisher decides the cover, the title in some cases, the editorial direction, the pricing, the publication timeline, the marketing approach, and which territories the book is released in. The author has some say, but the final decisions belong to the publisher. For an author who has a strong vision for what their book should be, that loss of control is significant.

Copyright is worth being explicit about. In some traditional deals, the author signs over copyright to the publisher rather than licensing it for a period. In a world where intellectual property has more commercial value than ever, particularly for business authors whose books contain frameworks, methodologies and original thinking, giving up copyright is a properly serious cost. Always read the contract carefully and understand exactly what rights you are transferring.

Time is the fourth cost. Traditional publishing operates on timelines that other routes do not. From signing the deal to seeing the book on shelves typically takes between twelve and twenty-four months. For a business author whose book is meant to support a current career move, that timeline might not work.

The production line mentality is the cost most authors don't see coming. Traditional publishers have hundreds of books in production at any one time, and your book is one of them. You will get attention at certain key points, but for long stretches your book sits in the queue while the team focuses on the title launching next month. If you're looking for one to one attention and hand holding, it's unlikely to happen.

The platform requirement

One thing to think about here, is that the publishers are not necessarily evaluating the book. They're considering whether they can sell it, and that decision rests on how saturated the marketplace your books fits into is, whether they have already published something similar and how strong is the author's existing platform.

If you are a first-time business author without a substantial existing audience, the traditional publishers are unlikely to take you on, (unless your manuscript is a unicorn, you have an excellent agent or you know someone at the Times). They will look at your social media following, your existing publications, your conference history, your media presence, and your demonstrated ability to sell something to a defined audience. If those numbers don't add up to a clear commercial proposition, they will pass.

This is a commercial calculation about whether the book can earn back its production costs given the platform the author already has and what the reader demand is. The publishers are running businesses in a tightening market, and they're being cautious about which authors they sign because they have to be.

For most debut business authors reading this book, the traditional route is statistically very unlikely to result in a deal. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try if your book is unusually strong or your platform is unusually substantial. It means you should go into the attempt with a realistic expectation of what's likely to happen, and a backup plan for when the rejections come.

Remember though, in order to get your book even in front of a graduate in charge of deciding whether you make it to the first round, you need an agent who will take ten to fifteen percent of any deal you get and your manuscript should at the very least have had a professional set of editing eyes on it to make sure it sells itself.

The partnership deal nobody mentions

There's a route through traditional publishers that most authors have never heard of, which is the partnership deal. Most traditional publishers will offer hybrid arrangements when they're interested in a book but not interested enough to take on the full commercial risk themselves. The author contributes to costs, the publisher provides the imprint and infrastructure, and the deal sits somewhere between a full traditional acquisition and a fully independent arrangement.

If a traditional publisher has shown interest in your book but doesn't want to offer you a standard deal, asking whether they would consider a hybrid arrangement is worth doing. They do exist, they're more common than the industry talks about openly, and for some authors they're the route that combines the imprint they wanted with terms they can actually access.

The costs are higher than working with an independent publisher because the traditional houses charge premium rates for hybrid arrangements. You're paying for the brand value of the imprint as well as the production costs. But for the right author with the right book, the hybrid route through a traditional publisher gets them onto a list that would otherwise be closed to them, though all the cons outlined earlier still apply. Paying for the arrangement doesn't change how the publisher operates.

The marketing reality

This is the cost most authors are blindsided by, and it cuts against the conventional wisdom that traditional publishing means the publisher does the marketing.

Traditional publishers do some marketing, particularly for their lead titles each season. Those are the ones the marketing budget concentrates on, the ones with the major reviews lined up and sales team is pushing hardest to the shops. For a debut author who is not the lead title of their season, the marketing support is significantly thinner than the author expected.

What traditional publishers expect from their authors in 2026 is that the they do most of the day-to-day marketing themselves. Using the existing platform to drive sales, running social media campaigns, organising podcast appearances and building email lists around the launch. The publisher provides infrastructure and a few key promotional opportunities, but the sustained marketing work falls on the author.

This is why the "you shouldn't pay anything for publishing" argument is so misleading when applied to traditional deals. You may not be paying upfront in cash, but you are paying in marketing time, in marketing budget for your own efforts, and in the royalties you give up over the lifetime of the book. There may also be an expectation that you enlist a PR agent. The cost is real, it just looks different.

When trad is the right answer

The traditional route is the right answer for an author who has a substantial existing platform, is willing to wait twelve to twenty-four months for publication, can accept significantly reduced creative control, and wants the reach and credibility of a major imprint. For that author, traditional publishing genuinely works.

It is also the right answer for an author with an unusually original or commercially obvious book, where the publisher can see the path to recouping costs even without a huge existing platform. These deals are rare, but they exist, and if your book is unusually good, the traditional route is worth pursuing properly.

For most debut business authors, traditional is not realistically available, and chasing it is more likely to cost them eighteen months of wasted submissions than it is to produce a deal.

The Independent Route

The independent route means working with a smaller publisher who operates outside the big six. The independent publishing world covers everything from large, well-established indies with substantial catalogues to small boutique presses with very specific editorial focuses, including imprints like FCM Publishing and Chronos Publishing, which I run.

What the indie route actually offers

Control is the first genuine advantage. Independent publishers operate on a more collaborative model than traditional houses, which means the author has meaningful input into the cover, the title, the editorial direction, the marketing approach, and the timeline. The publisher still brings expertise and will push back where they think the author is wrong, but the relationship is genuinely collaborative rather than top-down. I'll say directly if I think the author is making a poor decision and we'll have a conversation about it. There are occasions when I'll absolutely say no, but that tends to be on legal matters, and all publishers will be strict on that.

Royalty structures are significantly more favourable. Independent publishers typically offer between 30 and 70 percent of net receipts depending on the arrangement, compared to the 10 to 15 percent of traditional deals. The author keeps far more of what the book generates over its lifetime, which can amount to substantial money for a book that sells reasonably.

The working relationship is the third advantage and probably the most underrated. An independent publisher is working on a small number of books at any one time, which means your book gets sustained attention rather than being one of hundreds in a queue. You'll know your publisher personally, they will be reachable. Decisions can be made quickly rather than going through committees, so, for an author who wants to be a properly involved part of their book's production rather than a passive recipient of the publisher's process, the indie relationship works much better.

Distribution and credibility are the fourth advantage. A good independent publisher has distribution channels that get your book into the major online retailers, into some physical bookshops, and into the hands of reviewers. The imprint on your book carries weight, particularly with audiences who recognise the publisher. The reach is smaller than traditional, but it is real, and for many business authors it covers the audiences that actually matter.

What the indie route actually costs you

The contribution to production costs is the obvious one. As Part One established, this is not the same as paying for publishing. You're covering the costs of services your book needs anyway. Professional editing, proofreading, formatting, and cover design. The publisher absorbs the publishing infrastructure costs, but the production costs are shared.

The amount you contribute varies significantly between independent publishers. Reasonable indies charge between £3,000 and £15,000 depending on the level of editorial work the book needs and the production specification. Some charge more for premium services or for books with complex production requirements, others less for shorter books or simpler production.

The reach limitation is the second cost. An independent publisher can't put your book on the airport bookshop shelves in the way a traditional publisher can. The distribution is smaller and the major bookshop chains are harder to access. For most business authors this doesn't matter, because their audience is reached through other channels anyway, but for authors whose books are aimed at mass-market readers, the reach gap is significant.

The reputation gap is the third cost, although this one is shrinking. Some readers and some industry figures still treat independently published books as less serious than traditionally published ones. The gap is smaller than it used to be and continues to close, but it exists. A book from FCM Publishing carries different assumptions than a book from Penguin, and authors choosing the independent route need to be realistic about that.

When indie is the right answer

Independent publishing is the right answer for most serious business authors writing books for strategic reasons. The combination of editorial quality, working relationship, control, favourable royalties and credible distribution suits the kind of book that is part of building a wider career rather than competing for mass-market shelf space.

It is the right answer when your audience is reachable through professional channels rather than just through high street bookshops. When you want sustained attention from your publisher rather than being one book in a long queue. When you want the book to be properly yours, with your voice intact and your decisions respected. When you can write off the contribution to costs as a legitimate business expense, which most independent authors can.

It is not the right answer for authors whose books genuinely need mass-market distribution, or for authors who want the credibility of a major imprint above all else, or for authors who would prefer to be told what to do rather than collaborate. For those authors, traditional is the better fit if they can access it.

The Self-Publishing Route

The self-publishing route means producing and publishing your book yourself, either through platforms like Amazon KDP and IngramSpark or through assembled professional services that you arrange independently.

What self-publishing actually offers

Full control is the first advantage and the one most often cited by authors who choose this route. You decide everything. The title, the cover, the editorial direction, the production specification, the pricing, the timeline, the marketing approach. There is no publisher to negotiate with, no committee to convince, no editorial team to push back against your choices.

Full royalty retention is the second advantage. You keep all the money the book generates, less the platform fees and the costs of any services you bought in. On Amazon

KDP, the author keeps 35 or 70 percent of the sale price depending on the pricing tier, which is significantly more than any traditional or independent deal.

Speed is the third advantage. You can move from finished manuscript to published book in weeks rather than months or years. For authors with time-sensitive material or who want to test a book before committing to a longer publication process, self-publishing's speed is a genuine advantage.

What self-publishing actually costs you

The time to learn the platforms is the first cost, and most authors underestimate it significantly. Nielsens, Amazon KDP, IngramSpark, BookVault, and the various other publishing platforms each have their own systems, requirements, formatting specifications and quirks. Learning to use them properly takes weeks of work that the author themselves has to do. For a busy business owner, those weeks are significant.

The cost of professional services bought separately is the second cost. Editing, proofreading, formatting, cover design, ISBN registration, and distribution setup all cost money. Bought individually at retail rates, the total often comes out higher than the contribution to costs through an independent publisher, because independent publishers have established relationships and buying power that an individual author cannot match. Self-publishing only genuinely costs less than indie publishing if the author skips the professional services and does the work themselves, which produces books that look amateur regardless of how good the writing is.

The credibility gap is the third cost and the one most often dismissed by authors who choose self-publishing. The book industry, the major bookshops, the reviewers, the conference organisers, and the senior figures in most professional fields still treat self-published books as a lower tier than independently or traditionally published books. The gap is not always fair, and there are excellent self-published books that deserve more credibility than they get. But the gap exists, and the author choosing self-publishing needs to be realistic about what it costs them in terms of how their book is received.

The exception is authors with substantial existing platforms whose audience already trusts them. Steven Bartlett can self-publish without losing credibility because his existing platform carries the assumed quality that a publisher's imprint would otherwise provide. For authors without that level of platform, the lack of a publisher's imprint reads as a signal that the book wasn't worth publishing in the traditional or independent sense.

The bookshop reality is the fourth cost. Self-published books are extremely difficult to get stocked in physical bookshops, particularly the chains. Waterstones and similar will occasionally stock self-published titles, but generally only when the author has done substantial groundwork and the book has demonstrated sales elsewhere. For most self-published books, the only sales channel is online.

The quality control problem is the fifth cost. Without an editor, a publisher, or a quality control process, the self-published book carries every problem the author didn't catch themselves. Typos. Structural issues. Voice inconsistencies. Factual errors. The book that goes out is the book the author thought was finished, and most authors are not the right judges of whether their own work is actually ready.

The ego trap

The honest thing worth saying about self-publishing is that the desire for full control is often more about ego than strategy. Authors who insist on self-publishing because they "don't want anyone telling them what to do" are usually choosing a route that will cost them credibility and reach, in exchange for the satisfaction of being entirely in charge of the project.

For some authors that trade is genuinely worth making. For most, it is not. The kind of editorial pushback that a good independent publisher provides is exactly the kind of input that makes books better. Removing that input to preserve creative control usually produces a worse book and a less successful one.

If you are considering self-publishing because you want full control, examine the motivation honestly. Is the control you want actually about making the book better, or is it about being in charge? The first is a legitimate preference. The second is the ego trap that costs authors more than they realise.

When self-publishing is the right answer

Self-publishing is the right answer for authors with substantial existing platforms whose audiences will buy the book regardless of who publishes it. Steven Bartlett, established consultants with large mailing lists, public figures with media presence. For these authors, the credibility gap is closed by the platform, and the royalty retention plus speed plus control adds up to a genuinely better deal.

It is also the right answer for authors writing for genuinely niche audiences too small for commercial publishing. Specialist technical books, regional histories, very specific professional manuals. Where the audience exists but isn't large enough for a publisher to take on the risk, self-publishing puts the book in the hands of the readers who want it.

It is the right answer for authors with the time and skills to project-manage a complex production process across multiple service providers, and who genuinely have the editorial judgement to know what their book needs.

It is not the right answer for most first-time business authors, who lack the platform to close the credibility gap, the time to learn the production process properly, the buying power to match indie publishing on cost, or the editorial judgement to produce a finished book without professional input. For those authors, self-publishing usually produces a book that does less work for their career than they hoped, regardless of how good the writing actually is.

Hybrid, Partnership, and the One to Watch Out For

The words "hybrid" and "partnership" get used interchangeably across the publishing industry, and for practical purposes they describe the same model. An author contributes to the production costs of their book, and in return the publisher provides the editorial expertise, the imprint, the production infrastructure, the distribution channels, and an ongoing relationship with the book after it's out. The terminology varies between publishers, but the underlying arrangement is the same, and it's a legitimate one.

The confusion in the market comes from two directions. Some authors arrive having read that "hybrid publishing" is a red flag, without understanding that the criticism is aimed at a specific type of bad actor rather than the model itself. Others encounter publishers using both words interchangeably and assume there's a meaningful structural difference between them when there isn't. Neither confusion serves the author well, so it's worth being clear before we go any further.

What Hybrid and Partnership Publishing Actually Looks Like

In a legitimate hybrid or partnership arrangement, the author contributes to the production costs of the book. Those costs are real and specific: professional editing, proofreading, cover design, and formatting. These are the same costs that exist on every publishing route, just distributed differently. In a traditional deal the publisher absorbs them upfront and recoups them through royalties over decades. In a hybrid arrangement the author covers them directly, keeps a significantly higher royalty share, and retains more creative control over the finished book.

What the publisher brings is everything that turns a manuscript into a published book and keeps it functioning as one. The imprint, which gives the book its credibility and publishing identity. The ISBN registration and metadata management. The distribution setup through the major retail channels. The editorial process that ensures the book is genuinely ready before it goes out. The ongoing relationship with the book, including handling reprints, monitoring sales channels, and managing the book's catalogue presence over time.

This is not a lesser version of traditional publishing. It's a different commercial arrangement that suits a different type of author. The author who contributes financially and keeps up to 70%of royalties is in a meaningfully better long-term position than the author who contributes nothing upfront and keeps 12% of a traditional deal's net receipts for the next twenty years. For most business authors whose books are strategic assets rather than bids for mass-market distribution, the hybrid model provides everything the book actually needs.

The spectrum within hybrid and partnership publishing is worth understanding. Some publishers operate a lighter-touch model, providing the imprint, distribution, and core production services while leaving the author to manage more of the process. Others are more deeply involved in the editorial development of the book, the positioning, and the marketing approach. Both are legitimate, and the right fit depends on what level of involvement and support the author actually needs.

The questions to ask any hybrid or partnership publisher are about the depth of that involvement and what it covers.

- What does the editorial process actually look like?
- How many books are they working on at any given time?
- What happens to your book after publication?
- How are decisions made, and who has the final say?

The answers tell you whether you're engaging with a proper publishing relationship or something more transactional dressed up in the same language.

Avoiding Vanity Publishing

Vanity publishing is not a hybrid model and not a partnership model. It uses the same language and the same basic cost structure, but the business underneath it is entirely different, and the distinction matters enormously.

The defining characteristic of a vanity publisher is that there is no editorial threshold. They will publish any book, from any author, in any state, because the fee is the business model. The publisher profits from the transaction whether the book succeeds or not, which means they have no real incentive to ensure it does. The editing, where it happens at all, is cursory. The production is templated and the distribution is minimal. The book exists because it was paid for, not because it met any standard worth meeting.

The tells are not complicated.

- An acceptance that comes before any meaningful editorial assessment has taken place is the clearest one.
- A single all-in fee with no breakdown of what the production costs actually are is another.
- No back catalogue of books you'd be proud to appear alongside.
- No conversation about whether your manuscript is ready, whether it needs work, or whether it's the right fit for their list.

The best protection against vanity publishers is a clear understanding of what legitimate publishing looks like, which is what the first two parts of this book have been building. A publisher with genuine editorial standards, a transparent cost structure, a real imprint with a credible catalogue, proper distribution, and a genuine interest in whether your book works is not a vanity publisher, regardless of what the financial arrangement looks like. The contribution model is not the problem. The absence of standards is.

If a publisher's first question is about your budget rather than your book, walk away

"Understand that marketing is just as important as writing."

– Mark Dawson

PART THREE

CHOOSING YOUR ROUTE

Everything in Parts One and Two is context. This part is the decision.

The right publishing route for your book is not the same as the right publishing route for someone else's book, and it may not be the same as the route you instinctively want before you've thought it through properly. It's the route that fits your specific book, your specific audience, your specific professional situation, and your specific purpose for writing the thing in the first place. The questions below are the ones I work through with every author who comes to me for advice. Answer them honestly and the picture usually becomes clear.

What is the book actually for?

This is the first question and the most important one, because the answer shapes every decision that follows. A book written to support a career, build credibility in a professional field, open doors to speaking or consulting work, or establish expertise with a defined audience is a fundamentally different project from a book written to reach as many general readers as possible. The first type of book needs a publisher who understands its professional purpose and can reach the audiences that matter for that purpose. The second type needs the distribution muscle that only a traditional publisher can provide.

Most business authors, if they're honest, are writing the first type of book. They want the book to work for their career, not to compete with the bestseller chart. For that author, the traditional route is not the obvious choice it might appear to be, because the distribution and credibility it provides are calibrated for a different goal. An independent or hybrid publisher who understands business books, who has routes into the professional networks that matter, and who can position the book properly for its actual audience is likely to be a better fit.

If your book genuinely has mass-market potential, if it's written for a broad general audience and the goal is to be in airport bookshops and supermarkets, then traditional publishing is the route worth pursuing. Be honest with yourself about which of these your book actually is.

What does your existing platform look like?

Traditional publishers are not just evaluating your book. They're evaluating whether they can sell it, and that calculation depends heavily on the audience you've already built. If you have a substantial and engaged following across social media, a significant email list, a track record of media appearances, or a well-known name in your field, the traditional route is more accessible to you than it is to most.

If you don't have those things yet, that's not a reason not to write the book, it's just a reason to be realistic about which route is available to you. The traditional publishers are running commercial businesses and they will make a commercial calculation. If your platform doesn't stack up, the book will be rejected regardless of its quality, and the eighteen months spent chasing a traditional deal could have been spent publishing the book properly through a route that's actually open to you.

Be accurate about what your platform is, not what you hope it will be by the time the book comes out.

How important is your timeline?

Traditional publishing typically takes between twelve and twenty-four months from signing to publication. Independent and hybrid publishing typically takes between eight and twelve months depending on the publisher and the state of your manuscript. Self-publishing can be done in a much shorter time.

For some authors, timeline doesn't matter, for others, it matters enormously. If your book is tied to a specific moment in your career, a business launch, a speaking engagement, a period of significant media attention, or a window of particular relevance in your field, a traditional publishing timeline might simply not work. That's not a criticism of traditional publishing, it's just a practical constraint worth acknowledging early.

If speed is a genuine priority, independent, hybrid, or self-publishing are the routes that can deliver it. If timeline is flexible and the traditional route is otherwise a good fit, the wait is usually worth it for the right book.

How much does creative control matter to you?

In a traditional deal, the publisher makes the final decisions about the cover, the title in some cases, the editing direction, the pricing, and the marketing approach. You'll have input and your views will be considered, but the publisher has the authority. For some authors this is entirely acceptable, they'd rather hand those decisions to people who do it professionally and focus on the writing. For others it's a dealbreaker.

In an independent or hybrid arrangement, creative control sits much closer to the author. The publisher brings expertise and will advocate strongly for their professional judgement, but the relationship is collaborative rather than hierarchical and the author retains meaningful say over the book's final form.

In self-publishing, all creative decisions are yours. This is either the ideal or the problem, depending on your editorial judgement and your willingness to trust it.

Be honest about which of these you actually want, not which one you think sounds most professional. An author who needs control and signs a traditional deal will be frustrated. An author who wants to be told what to do and self-publishes will produce a worse book than they should have.

Where is your audience?

This is a practical question that most authors don't ask early enough. If your audience reads books they find in Waterstones, in airport bookshops, or on supermarket shelves, then physical retail distribution matters and only traditional publishing delivers it at scale. If your audience finds books through LinkedIn, professional networks, podcast recommendations, conference programmes, or through your own direct communications with them, then the distribution advantages of traditional publishing are largely irrelevant to you.

The majority of business authors have audiences that are online and in professional networks. For those authors, an independent or hybrid publisher with proper online retail distribution and a strong professional network covers the channels that actually matter. The gap in physical retail reach is real but largely academic for an author whose readers aren't looking for their book in every high street shop.

Map your actual audience, not the audience you'd like to have, and work out where they find books. The answer points clearly to which distribution model you need.

What is your budget?

Traditional publishing has no upfront cost (other than your initial edit/proofread before handing to agents). Independent and hybrid publishing involves a contribution to production costs, typically between £3,000 and £15,000 depending on the publisher and the book. Self-publishing involves paying for all services individually, which can easily exceed the hybrid contribution cost if done properly.

Budget is a real constraint and there's no point pretending otherwise, but it's worth thinking about it clearly rather than just reacting to the headline number. The contribution to production costs through a hybrid publisher is a business expense for most authors, and it can usually be treated as one for tax purposes. Weighed against the long-term return of a book that does serious work for a career, the upfront cost looks different than it does as a standalone number.

If budget is genuinely constrained, self-publishing is the route that can be done most cheaply, though not most effectively. If budget allows for a professional hybrid arrangement, the investment is almost always worthwhile for a book with a clear professional purpose.

What level of involvement do you want in the process?

Some authors want to be closely involved in every stage of their book's production. Others want to hand the manuscript over and receive a finished book. Both are valid, and different publishing models suit them differently.

Traditional publishers expect a degree of author involvement at key points but run most of the production process independently. The author is a participant at certain stages, not a project manager throughout. Independent and hybrid publishers tend to involve the author more continuously, partly because the collaborative model demands it and partly because the relationship is closer. Self-publishing puts the author in charge of the entire production process, which requires either genuine project management skills or a tolerance for learning them under pressure.

Knowing which of these you want prevents you from ending up in an arrangement that doesn't suit how you actually work.

Putting It Together

Most authors who work through these questions honestly find that the answer has been clear for some time. The framework isn't there to surprise you, it's there to give you enough confidence to act on what you already suspect. Indecision about publishing route is rarely a shortage of information. It's usually a reluctance to commit to the costs, the timeline, or the loss of control that the right route involves, and no amount of additional research resolves that. At some point the decision has to be made.

Once the route is clear, the next question is which publisher, and that requires a different kind of scrutiny entirely. Knowing you want an independent or hybrid publisher is a starting point, not a destination. The publishing industry contains excellent operators and poor ones across every model, and the difference between them is not always obvious from the outside. Part Four gives you the questions to ask before you sign anything.

"What makes a publishing house great? The easy answer is the consistency with which it produces books of value over a lengthy period of time."

– Robert Gottlieb

PART FOUR

QUESTIONS TO ASK ANY PUBLISHER BEFORE YOU SIGN

Choosing the right publishing route gets you to the right genre of publisher. It doesn't tell you which publisher within that category is actually worth working with. The independent and hybrid publishing world in particular contains genuinely excellent operators and equally poor ones, and the difference between them is not always obvious from the outside when you're reading their website or sitting in an initial conversation.

The questions in this section are the ones that separate publishers who know what they're doing from those who are very good at presenting as if they do. Ask them before you sign anything. A publisher who is serious about their work will welcome the questions. A publisher who becomes vague, defensive, or rushes you past them is telling you something important.

Can I see your back catalogue?

This is the first question and the most revealing one. A publisher's back catalogue is the most honest version of their offer. The books they've already produced tell you more about their editorial standards, their cover design capability, their production quality, and the kinds of authors they work with than anything on their website does. If you wouldn't be proud to have your book sit alongside the ones they've already published, that's your answer before any further conversation is necessary.

Ask to see books across different genres or categories if the publisher operates across several. Ask which titles they're proudest of and why. The answer tells you what they value. Also, view those titles on Amazon and look at reviews, that will tell you what readers think of the quality.

A decent publisher's website will also carry testimonials from authors they've worked with. Cross-reference those testimonials against the back catalogue, because seeing a named author's praise alongside the actual book they produced together gives you a much more complete picture than either does on its own.

What does your editorial process actually look like?

Not "do you edit books" but the specifics. Who does the editing, is it in-house or contracted out, what stages does it go through, and what does the author see and approve at each stage? A publisher with a real editorial process will be able to describe it clearly and in detail. A publisher whose editorial process is vague or described in broad terms that don't commit to anything specific is a publisher whose editorial process may not exist in any meaningful sense.

The editorial process is the thing that separates a publisher from a printer. It's where the investment in quality either shows up or doesn't, and it's worth understanding precisely what you're paying for.

What exactly do the production costs cover, and what's included in your publishing costs?

Part One of this book drew the distinction between production costs and publishing costs for a reason. Ask any hybrid or independent publisher to be specific about which is which. The production costs, the editing, proofreading, cover design, and formatting, should be itemised and transparent. The publishing infrastructure, ISBN registration, distribution setup, catalogue management, should be absorbed by the publisher as part of what makes them a publisher rather than a production service.

If a publisher can't or won't give you a clear breakdown, that's a reason for concern. Legitimate publishers can tell you exactly what your contribution covers because they know exactly what it costs.

How many books are you working on at any one time?

This question is about attention. An independent publisher working on thirty books simultaneously gives each one a fraction of the attention that a publisher working on eight can provide. Neither number is automatically right or wrong, but you need to know what it means for your book. If sustained editorial attention and a close working relationship are part of what you're paying for, you need to know whether the publisher's current workload makes that possible.

Follow this with: what does contact look like for an author whose book is in production with you? The answer gives you a realistic picture of the relationship rather than the idealised version.

Can I see the contract before I commit?

Any reputable publisher will make the contract available for review before you sign or pay anything. Ask for it early in the conversation, not as an afterthought once you've already agreed in principle, because reading it properly takes time and may raise questions that change the terms of the conversation entirely.

Read it in full. If any clause is unclear, ask the publisher to explain it in plain language. If anything in it conflicts with what you've been told verbally, that conflict needs resolving before you sign, not after. A publisher who is reluctant to share the contract until you've committed, who pressures you to sign quickly, or who dismisses your questions about specific clauses is not a publisher you should be working with.

It is worth having a publishing lawyer or a contracts-literate publishing professional review the agreement before you sign, particularly if the financial commitment is significant or if the rights clauses are complex. The cost of an hour of professional advice is considerably less than the cost of discovering a problem after the fact.

What is the royalty structure and when do I get paid?

Get this in writing and understand it completely before signing (it should be laid out in your contract). The royalty percentage matters but so does what it's calculated on. Net receipts, meaning the money the publisher actually receives after retailer discounts, is the most common basis and is reasonable. Royalties calculated on cover price sound better but usually only appear in traditional deals. Understand whether the royalty structure applies equally across print, ebook, and any other formats your book might be produced in.

Payment schedules vary between publishers. Some pay quarterly, some twice a year, some annually. Know what you're agreeing to and make sure the reporting is clear enough that you can verify the numbers.

Who owns the copyright, and what rights are you taking?

This is non-negotiable to understand clearly. In most independent and hybrid publishing arrangements, the author retains copyright and licenses the publisher to produce and distribute the book, however the physical book copyright belongs to the publisher, meaning if you change publisher then there is a reasonable expectation that it would be re-formatted and a new cover designed should you decide to change publisher. In some traditional deals, the copyright transfers to the publisher. In some hybrid deals, rights are carved up in ways that limit what the author can do with the book in future. Read the rights clauses carefully, and if you're not sure what you're reading, pay a publishing lawyer to explain it before you sign.

For business authors whose books contain original frameworks, methodologies, or intellectual property that underpins their commercial work, the rights question is not a formality. It has real long-term consequences.

What distribution channels will the book be available through?

An independent or hybrid publisher should be distributing your book through the major online retail channels as a baseline, Amazon, Waterstones online, Bookshop.org, and through a wholesaler that makes the book available to physical bookshops on request. Ask specifically which distributor they use and whether the book will be available for physical bookshops to order, even if it won't be stocked automatically.

If a publisher's distribution amounts to uploading your book to Amazon KDP and calling it done, that's self-publishing with a logo on the spine, not independent publishing. Distribution is part of what makes a publisher a publisher.

What do you expect from me on marketing?

Every publisher, traditional or independent, expects authors to do a significant portion of their own marketing. The honest conversation about this upfront is more useful than the surprise of discovering it after publication. Ask the publisher directly what they do on marketing and what they expect from you, and get specific answers rather than general reassurances.

A good publisher will have a clear view on how to position and promote your book and will be able to articulate it. They'll also be honest about what their marketing capacity covers and where the author needs to carry the load. A publisher who promises substantial marketing support without being able to describe what it actually consists of is making a promise they may not keep. Remember – your publisher is NOT your publicist.

What's the publication timeline from signing to publication?

Get a realistic timeline and understand what affects it. The manuscript's current state, the publisher's current workload and the production stages each take time. A timeline that sounds faster than is plausible is a red flag. A publisher who can walk you through the stages and give you realistic estimates for each one understands their own process. Bear in mind the publisher will know how long the services and printing will take.

Build the timeline into your planning before you sign, not after. If the publication date matters for professional reasons, make sure the agreement reflects that.

What happens after the book is published?

This is the question most authors forget to ask and most publishers are slightly relieved not to be asked. Publication is not the end of the publisher's job. Your book needs to remain available through retail channels, its metadata needs to be maintained, reprints need to be managed, and the book needs to be treated as a living asset rather than a completed project. Some publishers do this well and keep your book properly supported for years. Others treat publication as the end of the relationship and move on to the next project.

Ask specifically: who manages the book's retail listings after publication, what's the process for flagging and fixing errors, and what does the ongoing relationship between author and publisher look like in the years after the book is out.

What happens if things go wrong?

No author signs a publishing agreement expecting the relationship to break down, but it's worth understanding your options before you commit rather than after. Ask the publisher directly what the exit terms look like. If you need to withdraw from the agreement before publication, what are you entitled to and what are you liable for? If the book stalls in production, or the editorial relationship deteriorates, or the publisher fails to deliver on what was agreed, what recourse do you have?

The contract should address these scenarios explicitly, and a publisher who has thought through these eventualities and written them into the agreement clearly is a publisher who takes the relationship seriously. Vague or one-sided exit clauses are a warning sign worth paying attention to before you sign, not after.

One Final Question

Ask the publisher whether they would have published your book without the financial contribution you're making. The answer should be yes, contingent on your manuscript meeting their editorial standards, not contingent on the fee. If the honest answer is that any manuscript that comes with the fee gets accepted, you're not talking to a publisher. You're talking to a vanity operation that has borrowed a publisher's language.

A publisher who is proud of their editorial standards will answer this question without flinching. That's the publisher worth working with.

PART FIVE

THE PROCESS FROM SUBMISSION TO PUBLICATION

Now you know the different publishing options, the next stage to get to grips with is the process itself. Understanding what actually happens is important and most authors arrive at the submission stage with very little idea of what the process involves, how long it takes, or what will be asked of them at each stage. This section walks through both the traditional and independent routes from the point of first approach through to publication, so you know what to expect before you begin.

Before You Approach Anyone

I've written this based on you having already written your book. Some publishers, like mine offer writing partner services and so you'd start from a very different place, where we would work together on creating your book, however, for the simplicity of explaining the publishing process, let's begin at the point of you having a completed manuscript.

Whichever route you're pursuing, the same principle applies: your manuscript should be in the best shape you can get it into before it goes anywhere near a publisher or an agent. A first draft is not a submission-ready manuscript. It is the raw material from which a submission-ready manuscript gets made.

At a minimum, your manuscript should have been through a complete structural review, meaning you've looked seriously at whether the argument holds together, the chapters are in the right order, anything is missing, and anything is there that shouldn't be. It should have been proofread carefully, ideally by someone other than you. It should be formatted cleanly, with consistent heading styles, no tracked changes left in, and a word count that's in the right range for the kind of book you're producing. Now, this is in all honestly, an idealised version of what arrives in my inbox most weeks, and to be fair, most indie publishers are a little more understanding, trad publishers are not.

If you send me a book that is all over the place, expect to receive honest, constructive but blunt feedback.

Most business books run between 40,000 and 80,000 words. A submission significantly shorter or longer than that range needs a good reason.

If you have any doubt about whether your work is ready, a professional manuscript assessment before submission is worth the investment. Submitting a manuscript that isn't ready wastes your time, the publisher's or agent's time, and costs you a first impression you can't get back.

The Traditional Route: Finding an Agent

Traditional publishers do not accept unsolicited submissions from authors directly. To get your book in front of a traditional publisher, you need a literary agent who will act as your intermediary. The agent assesses manuscripts, selects the ones they believe in, and submits them to publishers on the author's behalf. In return, they take a commission of between ten and fifteen percent of any deal they negotiate.

Finding an agent requires a query letter, which is a single page that introduces you, describes your book, and makes the case for why it belongs on the publisher's list. A good query letter explains what the book is, who it's for, why you're the right person to have written it, and what comparable titles already exist in the market. It is not a summary of every chapter. It is a pitch, and it needs to be as well-written as the manuscript it represents.

Most agents also ask for a synopsis, which is a document of one to three pages summarising the book's structure and argument, and a sample of the manuscript, typically the first three chapters or the first fifty pages. Some ask for a full book proposal, particularly for non-fiction, which includes market analysis, a chapter-by-chapter outline, author biography, and comparable titles.

Before submitting to any agent, read their submission guidelines carefully and follow them exactly. Agents receive hundreds of submissions and those that don't follow the guidelines are often rejected before they're read. The guidelines exist because agents have a specific process for handling submissions and deviating from it creates work for them that they won't thank you for.

Research which agents represent books similar to yours before submitting. A literary agent who specialises in fiction is not the right submission for a business book. The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook and the Jericho Writers database are the standard resources for identifying appropriate agents in the UK.

Expect to wait. Agent response times run from four weeks to six months, and many agents state explicitly that if you haven't heard within a specific timeframe, the submission has been unsuccessful. Simultaneous submissions to multiple agents are standard practice and acceptable unless the agent's guidelines state otherwise. Track your submissions carefully.

If an agent offers to represent you, that conversation is itself a negotiation. Ask about their approach to your book, which publishers they have in mind, their commission structure, and the terms of the representation agreement. An agent whose vision for your book differs significantly from yours is not automatically the right agent even if they're enthusiastic.

Once an agent takes you on, they will submit your manuscript to publishers. This process can take months. Publishers read on their own timescales, and agents with strong relationships at specific houses will time their submissions strategically. You will be kept informed but you will also be waiting.

If a publisher makes an offer, your agent negotiates the deal on your behalf. The offer will cover the advance, (these days they're few and far between for debut authors) the royalty structure, rights, territory, and the publication timeline. Your agent will push for the best terms available. Once the deal is agreed, a contract is issued, reviewed, negotiated further if necessary, and signed. Bear in mind, your contract with your agent is separate to your contract with your publisher and you will be responsible for paying their royalty split.

Then the editorial process begins.

The Independent Route: Approaching a Publisher

Independent and hybrid publishers accept direct submissions from authors, without an agent acting as intermediary. The process is more direct but requires the same level of preparation.

Most independent publishers have submission guidelines on their website. Read them before you submit anything, and follow them precisely. The guidelines will specify what they want from you, whether that's a query letter, a synopsis, sample chapters, a full manuscript, or a completed submission form. They will often specify word counts for synopses and covering letters, preferred file formats, and turnaround expectations. An author who ignores these instructions is signalling that they won't be easy to work with, which is not a first impression worth making.

Your covering letter should introduce you and your book, explain what the book is and who it's for, make the case for why this publisher is the right fit for it, and include a brief author biography that establishes your credibility and platform. Keep it to one page.

A good synopsis for an independent publisher summarises the book's argument and structure clearly and concisely, demonstrating that the book has a coherent through-line and a defined audience. For non-fiction, a chapter-by-chapter outline is often more useful than a narrative synopsis.

The publisher will read your submission and make an assessment. At a reputable independent publisher, this assessment is editorial, meaning they're evaluating whether the manuscript is strong enough to publish and whether it fits their list, not just whether the author can cover the production costs. If the manuscript needs significant work before it's publishable, a good publisher will tell you that honestly rather than accepting it as-is and charging you for production.

If the publisher is interested, the next conversation covers the editorial assessment in more detail, the production costs and what they cover, the royalty structure, rights, the publication timeline, and the terms of the publishing agreement. Review the contract carefully before signing. The points covered in Part Four of this book apply in full here.

From Manuscript to Published: The Editorial and Production Process

Once the agreement is signed, the process from that point is broadly similar across traditional and independent publishing, though the timelines and the level of personal involvement differ.

The editorial process typically runs in three stages. The first is the structural or developmental edit, where the editor works through the manuscript at a high level, addressing argument, structure, pacing, chapter order, and any significant gaps or redundancies. This stage can result in substantial revision and the author is expected to engage with the feedback and produce a revised manuscript. For most business books, this is the most demanding stage editorially, and the feedback, when it's done well, makes the book significantly stronger.

The second stage is the copy edit, where the editor works through the manuscript line by line, addressing grammar, punctuation, consistency, clarity, and house style. The copy-edited manuscript comes back to the author with tracked changes and queries, and the author reviews and accepts or queries each change. This stage requires attention and time. It is not a formality.

The third stage is the proofread, which happens after the manuscript has been typeset. The proofreader checks the typeset version for errors introduced in the formatting process, remaining typos, layout issues, and consistency. The author receives the proofread version for a final check before print.

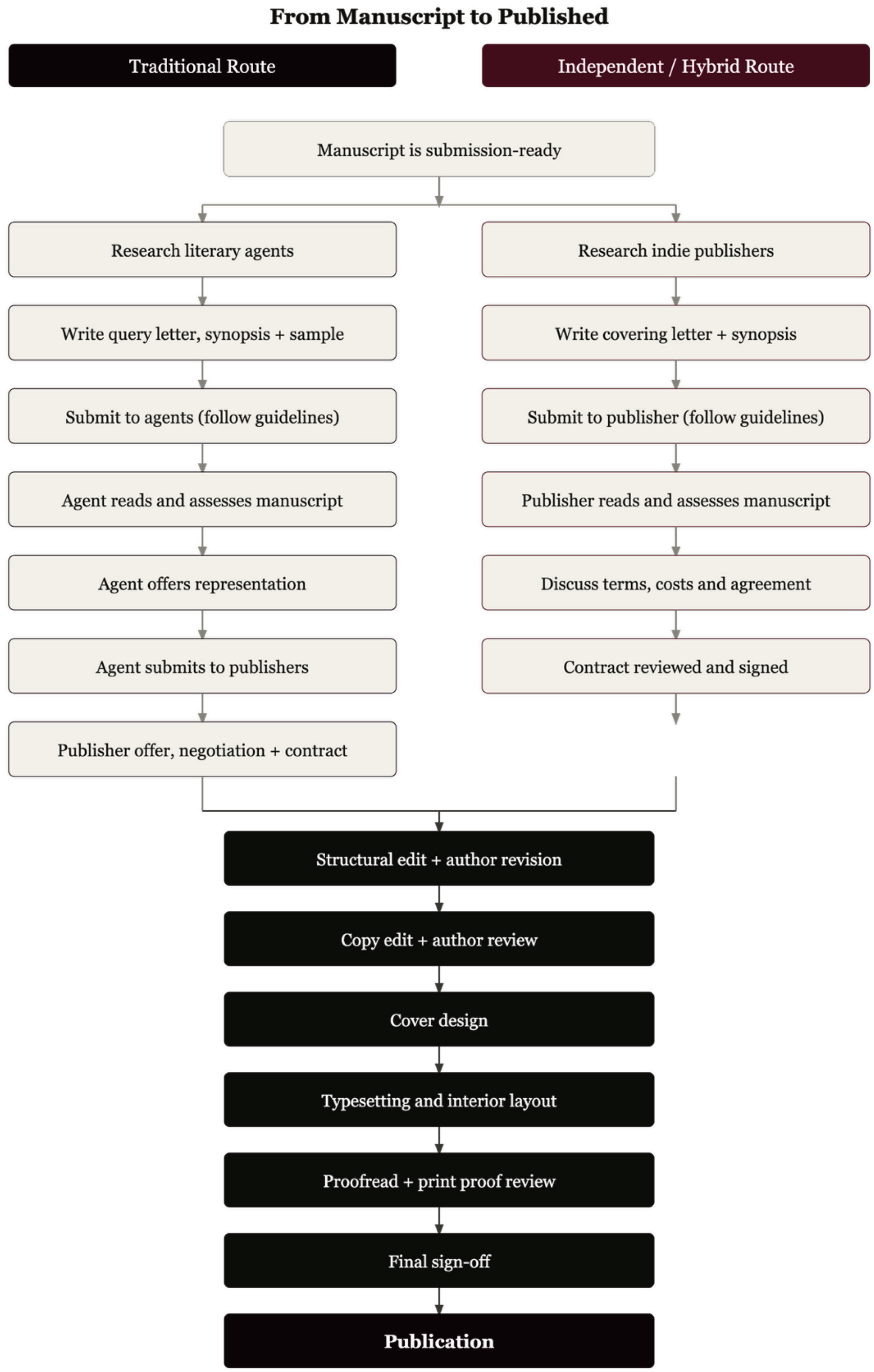
Running alongside the editorial process is the cover design. In a traditional deal, the publisher leads the cover design process and the author has limited formal input, though most publishers will consult on direction and share concepts. In an independent arrangement, the process is more collaborative, with the author having meaningful input into the brief, the direction, and the final design. Either way, the cover is designed to sell the book to its intended audience, and professional design expertise should take precedence over personal preference where they differ.

Typesetting and interior layout happen after the copy edit is complete. The manuscript is formatted to the publisher's specification, with consistent heading styles, chapter breaks, page numbering, and any internal design elements. For most business books this is a clean, straightforward process. For books with diagrams, tables, or complex layouts it takes longer.

Once typesetting is complete, a print proof is produced. For printed books, this is a physical copy produced at final specification, exactly as the book will appear in print. The author and publisher review the print proof carefully for any layout errors, print quality issues, or final corrections. This is the last opportunity to catch anything before the book goes to print, and changes at this stage are costly, so the review should be thorough. Your contract will state that it is your responsibility to accept the book at this stage.

After the print proof is signed off, the book goes to print and the ebook version is finalised. Distribution is set up, metadata is submitted to the relevant channels, and the book becomes available for ordering. Publication day follows.

The diagram here shows both processes side by side.



While the process is happening there will be the expectation that you will be starting to market the book, raise interest and hype prior to release. Things such as cover reveals, teaser posts are a good way to do this.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

By this point you have enough to make a genuinely informed decision about your publishing route, understand what you're paying for and why, and walk into a conversation with any publisher knowing the right questions to ask. That's the purpose this book was written to serve.

If you have a manuscript and you'd like an honest, professional assessment of whether it's ready and which publishing route it's suited for, a Manuscript Review is the most useful next step. I'll read your manuscript and give you clear, direct feedback on its current state, what it needs before it goes near a publisher, and which of the routes in this book is the right fit for it and why. You'll have a concrete publishing recommendation based on your actual book, not a general framework.

A Manuscript Review costs £250. Contact me at taryn@thefcmgroup.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taryn Lee Johnston is an award-winning publisher, book writing partner, and media consultant based in Lincoln. She is the founder of FCM Publishing, which publishes non-fiction, business, and self-help titles, and Chronos Publishing, which specialises in memoirs, autobiographies, and novels. Through Taryn Lee Johnston Integrated Media Consultancy she works with founders, executives, and public figures on marketing strategy, publishing consultancy, and book writing partnerships.

She is co-founder of NovoBooks, a next-generation publishing platform designed to change how authors and publishers connect and sell.

Taryn has spent years working directly with authors making publishing decisions, and her frustration with how badly that industry is explained to the people entering it is what prompted this book. She is a regular contributor on the industry and a speaker on publishing, AI, and the business of books.