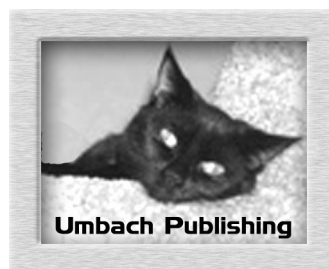


**THE PURSUIT OF  
PUBLISHING  
AN UNVARNISHED GUIDE  
FOR THE PERPLEXED**

**KEN UMBACH**

*UPDATED OCTOBER 2009*



The Pursuit of Publishing  
Copyright © 2009 by Kenneth W. Umbach  
All rights reserved

Large-format edition

Umbach Publishing  
6966 Sunrise, Blvd., #263  
Citrus Heights, CA 95610  
[www.umbachconsulting.com](http://www.umbachconsulting.com)  
[info@umbachconsulting.com](mailto:info@umbachconsulting.com)  
916-733-2159

*The Pursuit of Publishing* represents the author's views. Readers should make their own inquiries and evaluate their own situation and circumstances before making any decision regarding a publishing option. *The Pursuit of Publishing* is not designed to provide specific answers for individual writers.

Revised 10-18-09

# Contents

<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. THE WRITER’S DILEMMA.....</b>	<b>6</b>
IS IT COMMERCIAL?.....	6
DOES THE AUTHOR HAVE A PLATFORM? .....	7
<b>3. HOW TO PURSUE COMMERCIAL PUBLICATION.....</b>	<b>8</b>
FINDING AN AGENT.....	9
FINDING A PUBLISHER .....	10
WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT A BOOK PROPOSAL? .....	11
<b>4. SELF-PUBLISHING.....</b>	<b>12</b>
AUTHENTIC SELF-PUBLISHING.....	12
THE PRINT-ON-DEMAND ALTERNATIVE.....	14
<b>5. SUBSIDY AND VANITY PUBLISHING.....</b>	<b>15</b>
SUBSIDY PUBLISHING .....	15
VANITY PUBLISHING.....	16
IS VANITY OR SUBSIDY PUBLISHING EVER A GOOD CHOICE? .....	19
THE ODD DUCK: LULU.COM .....	19
<b>6. COMMENTS AND EXAMPLES .....</b>	<b>20</b>
QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS .....	20
EXAMPLES OF AUTHORS AND THEIR PATHS .....	21
<b>7. SOURCES AND RESOURCES.....</b>	<b>23</b>
BASIC HOMEWORK .....	24
HIT THE BOOKS .....	24
MAGAZINES FOR WRITERS .....	28
TRADE PERIODICALS AND REVIEW VENUES .....	28
WRITERS’ ORGANIZATIONS.....	29
WRITERS’ CONFERENCES, WORKSHOPS, AND CONTESTS .....	29
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....</b>	<b>30</b>

# 1. Introduction

Countless people want to write a book. Most of them want that book to be published. Some naturally want to make a lot of money from their writing. Others may be satisfied to have their words in print and for sale, with little concern for profit, because they have a story or a point of view or information to share or because they simply want to be a published author.

*Most know little or nothing about how publishing works, what the odds are of having a book published by one of the big publishers, or what the alternatives are and how they might meet or undermine their interests.*

Big Publishing—the handful of large conglomerate publishers—is not easy to break into. Yes, it can be done, and obviously it is done every day by writers who polish their writing, learn how to work the system, and persist. Those who make their way in and whose books sell well can keep on writing and being published by the big houses. Those whose books sell poorly might be shut out or have to turn to a pen name for the next book and a new start.

Literary agents frequently are the means for writers to seek publication by one of the major publishers. The hard part for a writer is *getting an agent in the first place*. After a writer has signed with an agent, and only after the agent is satisfied that the manuscript or book proposal is ready to be submitted to publishers, does the agent approach publishers to gauge their interest and, if possible, get the manuscript signed to a book contract.

Many smaller publishers, the ones that are independent of the giants, may be easier to break in with and may focus on niches that are suited to particular writers and their topics. But they, too, are profit-making enterprises and have to look for books with a market and authors who can help their books succeed.

A writer might not need an agent to approach an independent publisher, especially one of the smaller ones. In fact, agents are not much interested in dealing with smaller publishers, as the advances they pay are too small to make the effort pay for them. Agents, of course, depend on their percentage (typically 15 percent) of the author's advances and royalties.

Authors might choose to—or be left no other choice but to—submit their manuscripts to some alternative type of publisher, called a vanity press or a subsidy publisher. It could be either that or leave the manuscript in a drawer, unpublished and unseen. Or they might choose to publish their own works, becoming a business person whose business is publishing, specializing in publishing their own writing. (Of course, anyone writing for pay, whether flat fee or royalties, is in the business of writing and needs to keep an eye on records of expenses and income and file appropriate tax returns. Writing as a profession is a business, even if the writer leaves the publishing to someone else.)

*The Pursuit of Publishing* introduces those avenues for publication and their implications for writers. It is an “unvarnished” look because I have tried to be as direct as I can. The exception is noted when it comes. I have also kept this booklet short and to the point.

I want to encourage writers who seek commercial publication, but I recognize that most will not achieve that goal, either because their writing does not meet commercial standards or needs or because there is simply too much competition and there are too many obstacles. Writing is a tough business in which to make a living.

I support independent publishing for those who choose it, but it is a hard business and not for every writer. In fact, it is for very few, a point explored in its place below. There are good reasons for the bad reputation of self-publishing, in spite of the many examples of worthwhile and sometimes even superb books published by authors.

I will explain some important terms, outline writers' options, and summarize the pros and cons of those options.

There are no absolute answers. What works well for one writer might be a poor choice for another, or might simply not be attainable for the other writer.

Goals differ, interests differ, and timeframes differ. A writer at age 25 might have a very different set of potential opportunities than a writer at age 70. A writer who is an entrepreneur and a business person can take on a different set of challenges than one who has no interest in business and who wants to write for commercial publication.

Consider romance novelist Brenda Novak, who wrote her first novel as a married mother seeking profitable work she could do at home. Through persistence and talent, she parlayed her first commercially published novel—it took years of work before it was published—into a successful career as author. Brenda had motivation, saw an opportunity, and pursued it energetically, becoming a full-time professional novelist in the process.

Likewise, consider Alton Pryor, who wrote and self-published his first book at age 70. Since then, he has written and published 16-plus more books, at the rate of one or two a year. His books sell well, some having sales figures that a commercial publisher would envy. Alton had the desire and interest and opportunity to turn his writing into a full-time business, and he has succeeded.

Both of those writers have achieved success, but in very different ways. Their successes illustrate two key points along the spectrum of publishing: novel-writing for commercial publication as a full-time occupation for Brenda and self-publishing as a business for Alton. I'll throw some light on that spectrum and will provide more examples of individuals along its length.

This essay is simply an introductory overview, but it will give you a framework for understanding and drawing together a unique range of topics while pointing you toward quality sources for the details and special topics.

I want to help you to think about options and opportunities and to show you where to find more information and high-quality resources. *If this booklet leads you to ask the right questions and to follow up, then it has done its job.*

## 2. The Writer's Dilemma

These short chapters are for writers with a book manuscript nearing completion or completed, but with no experience in publishing.

Writers who have been around the block a few times, who have learned the methods for attaining commercial publication and who have books published by commercial publishers, are probably too busy writing, polishing, or seeking a publisher for current work to have any interest in anything I might say here. Likewise, those who are already successful in independent publishing are not my audience.

So, for those writers who have joined me here, pull up a chair and let's chat.

### ***Is it commercial?***

Question Number One for Jane Q. Author is, "Is this manuscript something with an audience large and accessible enough for a commercial publisher to be interested?" *Is it commercial?*

That is not a question that Jane has necessarily thought about. My conversations with aspiring writers have suggested that few do think about that question. Jane's audience has been herself, her friends, her family, and maybe a circle of writers in a local group, most or all of whom might be similarly inexperienced with commercial book publishing. Those who succeed in the business of book authorship leave the group and perhaps come back on occasion as visiting speakers.

Jane might have friends in her writing group who have had their manuscripts turned into books by vanity publishers or subsidy publishers. Jane's friends are often unaware that such is not commercial publishing and is not recognized by leading writers' organizations—it is not a formal publishing credit. Those friends can be terribly misleading.

Here's the rub: a manuscript might be a fine and readable piece of work and yet not have a large enough or accessible enough audience to be suitable for a commercial publisher. *"Not commercially publishable" does not necessarily mean "not worth reading."*

I will fudge the details, but have to give an example. We will call him Tomas. He has written a long, detailed memoir of a traumatic period in his life. The memoir is set in a far away place during a period of tumult, clearly the stuff of adventure and intrigue. It is his life's work, his masterpiece. And as it stands, it is not publishable. It is too long, should be reshaped, and has too narrow a potential audience in its current form.

To be of interest to a commercial publisher, the manuscript would have to be edited down radically, perhaps by as much as half, and restructured to provide a dramatic arc and to appeal to a wide readership through universal lessons.

As Tomas has invested much of his life in crafting his manuscript, has bled words onto hundreds of pages, documenting his story and the story of that time and place, he is reluctant to trim, let alone to slash and rewrite wholesale. And he might not have the skills or the objectivity to do so.

Tomas might not even understand the need for a carefully crafted query letter with which to approach agents or publishers, nor know how to write such a query, let alone a more comprehensive book proposal. What to do? That is the dilemma of one who does not even know what the right questions are.

Yet, without going through the process of queries and inevitable rejections, Tomas cannot learn what agents and publishers are, and are not, looking for. How does he start when he does not know where or how to start?

### ***Does the author have a platform?***

An author's chance of commercial publication is improved by a platform. What is a "platform"? It is a ready-made audience of buyers for that book, an audience with which the author can communicate and that the publisher can exploit in promoting and marketing the book.

Public figures, especially in high-profile positions such as President, U.S. Senator, or governor of a large state, have a platform. Much-published magazine or newspaper writers (with a syndicated newspaper column, for example) have a platform. Celebrities—people who are already famous for being famous—have a platform. Hosts of popular television shows have a platform.

Most of us do not have a platform. That does not eliminate the possibility of being commercially published. It just moves us back in the line. Unless Tomas has been prominent as a public speaker, a writer of op-ed pieces in large newspapers, or regular guest on TV programs, he does not have a platform.

Jane Q. Author or our friend Tomas must step back and evaluate not only the suitability of the manuscript—quality of writing, clarity of topic, timeliness—but also their own salability as an author. That is, they must *if they have any idea that they need to do that*.

*That is the writer's dilemma.* The writer has much to do, but probably does not know what it is, despite having what might be, in its own way, a well written manuscript. No one stands ready to explain that. Those who could do so best are the very people who must be approached in the process of seeking commercial publication and whose role the author probably does not understand.

Along the way, Jane or Tomas might be waylaid by fellow writers who have succumbed to the lure of vanity publishing, or its close cousin subsidy publishing. The siren song of ready acceptance, perhaps with a cost of a few hundred or a couple thousand dollars (and perhaps with a much higher price tag), but with the (false) image of commercial publishing may be irresistible. And then Jane or Tomas may become a new recruiter into the world of vanity or subsidy publishing. In that role, they

might ensnare the occasional writer whose work is genuinely ready for prime time yet who is unaware of how to proceed.

Next we'll look at the standard ways to seek commercial publication.

### 3. How to Pursue Commercial Publication

Let's take as a given for this chapter that you have already written a good manuscript—readable, original, well thought out, in a recognizable genre, free of errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage, well organized, and with opening pages that will grab a reader's attention.\* We are not talking about how to write it, but only about how to sell it once you have it.

*Mind you, we are taking a lot as a given here, as slush piles (accumulated unsolicited manuscripts) at commercial publishers' offices will attest. Most manuscripts have no chance of publication because they are poorly written or lack credibility or were sent to a completely inappropriate publisher.*

Brian Hill and Dee Power, in their book *The Making of a Best Seller*, report on a survey that indicates agents accept only about two out of every 1,000 submissions. Publishers, in turn, accept only about one out of each 100 submissions *from agents*. Even allowing for multiple submissions and re-submissions of revised manuscripts and unagented submissions, the odds are stacked very heavily against authors. The odds are probably not the 5,000:1 against suggested by the surveys, but might be 100:1 against after the adjustments, or worse.

So, quality manuscript in hand, now what?

First of all, *if you are confident in your manuscript and in yourself as an author, forget the odds*. Your odds of acceptance are zero if you do not query and submit (and query and submit until you succeed). *Persistence and professionalism improve the odds.*†

Let's get one important fact on the table right now: *commercial publishers pay their authors, through advances and royalties*. (Technically, “advances” are advances against anticipated royalties; the larger the expected royalties, the larger the advance.) Any publisher that requires ANY payment from the author is NOT a legitimate commercial publisher. In the same vein, commercial publishers focus on selling books to readers, to the public. Any publisher that focuses on selling books in bulk to its authors is NOT a legitimate commercial publisher.

---

\* Nonfiction books are more likely to be sold on the basis of a query followed by a book proposal, including outline, sample chapters, and marketing plan. The full manuscript need not have been completed, although the author must be prepared to complete it on time if the proposal is accepted. Novels are typically sold from a completed manuscript.

† Leonard S. Bernstein's 1986 book *Getting Published: The Writer in the Combat Zone* gives a superb exploration of that point. The book is worth finding in a library or used book store. Also see Ray White and Duane Lindsay, editors, *How I Got Published* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007). A key theme of writers who tell their stories in the book is **persistence**.

Now, with that out of the way, you have two options for seeking commercial publication by a normal, royalty-paying publisher whose books enter normal trade channels, including bookstores. One is to query literary agents in order to seek representation of the manuscript. The other is to query a publisher directly, or in *rare* cases to send a manuscript.

**What is a query?** It is a concise letter to introduce your manuscript and yourself. *The query must catch the interest of the agent or publisher by showing why this particular manuscript has the potential to sell well and why you are the right author for it.*

A successful author has to know how to craft a successful query and its more comprehensive cousin, a book proposal. More about both later.

## ***Finding an agent***

Turn to Sources and References, starting on page 23. Come back here after you have read “Basic homework” and, under “Hit the books,” the sections on “Trade references” and “Finding agents and publishers.”

Take your time.



Ok, back again?

If yours is a book with a big market (tens of thousands of readers or more), one that belongs in bookstores like Barnes & Noble and Borders and that might be a potential book club selection (Book of the Month, Literary Guild, or one of the more specialized ones), then you will want to find an agent who will seek to place it with one of the half-dozen giant publishers, or at least with one of the larger independent publishers.

Literary agents make their living from a percentage of the advances and royalties that their clients earn from published books. For that reason, they have to concentrate on books and authors with big potential: books reasonably expected to sell tens of thousands of copies, and authors who could write one successful book after another for years to come.

*If your book manuscript lacks that kind of potential—maybe it is on a niche or regional subject—but still has a reasonably big potential market, then it might not fit an agent’s interests. In that case, you could directly query appropriate publishers (which usually means small-to-medium).*

Agents, like publishers, specialize. Agents, like publishers, range from small to large. Study the resources listed in the Sources and References section and check out agents’ websites for more recent information. List agents in order from best prospect on down.

Agents, like publishers, value a writer’s “platform,” his or her connection to readers through such means as speaking engagements, syndicated newspaper column, large mailing list, and other effective exposures. “Platform” is a mantra, especially for nonfiction authors, but it can be important

for fiction authors as well. For that reason, include information on your platform in your query. It might become critical in acceptance of you as a client and later in acceptance of your manuscript by a publisher.

Edit and polish your query letter to perfection. Enclose a self-addressed-stamped envelope (SASE) for reply. (The #9 size business envelope fits inside of a standard #10 business envelope, so you do not need to fold the envelope. A one-page query plus return envelope will be well under one ounce.)

Publishers—and therefore agents—value writers who can actively market their books. An author who actively pursues radio and TV interviews, personal appearances, has an active website and email list, and in other ways promotes herself or himself and the book is going to do better and be more attractive to publishers. Mention what you can do to help with promotion.

Bear in mind that selling and promotion (sometimes loosely called “marketing,” as I have done in previous editions of *The Pursuit of Publishing*) are completely different concepts. Recognize that authors have an important role in *promotion*, but not in selling.

## ***Finding a publisher***

If your manuscript is not represented by an agent, then you need to focus on the right potential publishers from among those that accept unagented submissions.

You know the drill if you have studied the Sources and References section as instructed above. Scour bookstores. Take notes. Study guides to publishers. Take notes. Flag likely prospects. Follow up with requests for guidelines, and look at catalogs to see what else the likely publishers are publishing. *Take notes.* You need to know that sort of thing to craft an effective book proposal or to target an effective query to a suitable publisher.

Keep your eyes open for independent publishers that are open to queries, book proposals, and manuscripts from writers, but always be sure that your manuscript is the sort of thing the publisher actually is seeking and publishing.

If you have decided to approach publishers directly rather than through an agent, then build your list of publishers that:

- Publish books generally like yours
- Accept unagented submissions
- Offer terms you can live with

Publishers that do not accept unsolicited manuscripts might be open to reading a one-page query letter. It cannot hurt to try. Always enclose a self-addressed-stamped envelope (SASE) for reply.

Put your list of potential publishers in order from best prospect on down. Polish your query letter and make sure you are ready to send a full book proposal (see page 11 below for a brief explanation of that) or the full manuscript promptly if asked. Have others review your query letter. The better qualified your readers the better it is for the resulting letter. Be sure you pay close attention to the publisher's guidelines. You might have to develop different query letters, different book proposals, and even somewhat different manuscripts for different publishers.

Format your manuscript appropriately. Requirements include double-spacing, adequate margins, your name in a header on every page, page numbers, printed on standard white paper, 20 pound or up, unbound (no staples, no coil binding), and careful proofreading to eliminate errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage. Query letters and book proposals must likewise be appropriately written, formatted, and printed.

Let me remind you: most manuscripts submitted to publishers are poorly written, submitted to the wrong publisher for that manuscript, or both, and many are sloppily formatted or printed. Publishers will reject unprofessional manuscripts. The first page or two might be enough to earn a rejection. Polish your manuscript. Have it read and critiqued by people qualified to do so and who will be direct and honest in commenting. Revise accordingly. And be certain you are querying or submitting only to appropriate publishers.

By making the extra effort to craft a quality manuscript and by approaching only appropriate publishers, you put yourself and your manuscript ahead of the large majority.

Recognize that your manuscript might never reach the level needed for commercial publishing, or it might not be suitable for commercial publishing for other reasons. If your manuscript is in the ballpark, then an agent or publisher will at least take a look if the manuscript gets into their hands.

Most book manuscripts never reach commercial publication. However, you might be able to write a better book or one with better commercial possibilities that does make it through the process.

## ***What was that about a book proposal?***

I've mentioned book proposals, but without explaining. Here is a quick overview.

The book proposal is an expanded, fully-fleshed-out version of the query. The book proposal includes (with details depending on what the agent or publisher wants):

- A synopsis of the manuscript
- Sample chapters
- Explanation of your qualifications for writing the book (essential for nonfiction, possibly quite useful for historical fiction, for example)
- Resources you have access to for writing the book (necessary for nonfiction—sources of data, interviews, documents, whatever is pertinent)

- Your previous publishing credits (commercial publishing, not vanity publications) and success with those
- Information on your platform for helping to promote the book—newspaper column, radio or TV appearances, organization offices, large mailing list of people who want to hear from you, or other means of communicating effectively with large potential audiences of book buyers
- Information on where the book would fit within the publisher’s catalog and specialties
- A summary of competing titles and of how this particular book meets a need and why it has a large enough audience to be profitable

For more information, see pertinent sections of *Writer’s Market* and *Jeff Herman’s Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, & Literary Agents*, for example, and such books as *Bulletproof Book Proposals*, by Pam Brodosky and Eric Neuhaus. The latter has full sample proposals, with commentary. Also see <http://publishingsyndicate.com/PS/WowPublications.htm> for information on Ken and Dahlynn McKowen’s friendly guide to nonfiction book proposals.

## 4. Self-Publishing

Self-publishing is a complex topic. This chapter gives only an overview to clarify terms and to lay out key issues for writers who might wish to publish their own books as a business venture.

First and foremost, note this: **a genuine self-publisher is a writer who owns the ISBN for his or her book.** (ISBN = International Standard Book Number, issued in the U.S. by Bowker.) Those who do not own the ISBNs on their books are not self-publishers. They might be taking an active role in the promotion and even distribution of their books, but they are not self-publishers according to that one clear criterion.

Equally important, **a self-publisher is a business person, an entrepreneur.** This is critical. Self-publishing (or any form of publishing) is a business, with all that implies. Writers who do not want to run a publishing business should not consider self-publishing. The business aspects of writing for publication by others will provide quite enough challenge in addition to the writing itself.

### ***Authentic self-publishing***

What I call authentic self-publishing might also be called independent publishing. It is commercial publishing on a small scale, conducted as a business, with all that implies, including an inventory of printed books.

The authentic self-publisher not only writes the book, but either directly or through contract::

- Edits the manuscript
- Obtains Library of Congress catalog information for the book
- Purchases ISBN in his or her publishing company’s name

- Designs book (interior and exterior)
- Proofreads galleys (pre-publication review copy)
- Markets and promotes
- Obtains advance reader comments (blurbs) and seeks book reviews
- Distributes to the trade or makes available for sale to a specific audience or audiences
- Prints hundreds or thousands of copies
- Stores copies awaiting sale
- Fulfills orders

In short, the authentic self-publisher does—or contracts for—every publishing activity for which a commercial publisher, large or small, would be responsible. The authentic self publisher is running a publishing business that is unique only in that the publisher is also the author of the books published.

It is a short, but significant, step for such a publisher to take on books by other authors. In the process, which might require hiring staff as well as contracting out services, the publisher becomes a small press and takes on additional legal and financial responsibilities. In time, such a publisher might grow large or be acquired by a major commercial publisher, as happened to Prima Publishing. (Prima was originally a self-publisher, starting with one book by author/publisher Ben Dominitz. It is now an imprint of publishing giant Random House.)

The entire concept and process of self-publishing has been laid out in detail in two leading books:

- *The Self-Publishing Manual*, by Dan Poynter
- *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing*, by Tom & Marilyn Ross

Those books are the bibles of self-publishing. If you are serious about getting into the business of publishing your own books, you will study one or both.

A short, friendly introduction by a prolific self-publisher is *Publish It Yourself*, by Alton Pryor. Other books have appeared in recent years and may be found in large bookstores, such as Barnes & Noble.

Again: those who are serious about investigating self-publishing—what it is and what it takes—will read Poynter’s book, the Rosses’ book, or both. *I cannot emphasize this too much.*

Now for the unvarnished caution: **self-publishing can result in costly losses.** The author must have created a book that readers will want to buy, know the audience, have a marketing and promotion plan that will work to let those buyers know about the book, and have a means of distribution that will get the book—bought and paid for—into their hands. **Omission or inadequacy of any element of the publishing plan can result in disaster—an empty bank account, unpaid obligations, and a garage full of moldering books.**

## ***The print-on-demand alternative***

An author can self-publish a book through print-on-demand (POD), avoiding the up-front costs necessary for a print run of hundreds or thousands of copies. However, for the book to be considered *self*-published, the author-publisher must own the ISBN. The author-publisher will be responsible, directly or through contract with specialists, for editing, book design, cover design, and all other aspects of book publishing.

The booklet you are holding now is an example of self-publishing started via POD. I wrote the manuscript, designed the layout, designed the cover, edited the content, obtained comments, and made revisions. I uploaded the file and managed the steps to finalize the form of the book for print-on-demand printing.

And then I revised the contents and repeated the process again, and yet again, as things that needed fixing quickly became apparent.\* This is nothing like commercial publishing and is a pale alternative to authentic self-publishing.

POD is a convenient approach suited to limited purposes. It might fit your purposes. You might choose to purchase an ISBN and distribution package to make your book available through Amazon and other retailers. I strongly recommend, however, that before you do that, you have a small first printing and get plenty of feedback so that you can polish the manuscript yet again before investing in ISBN and distribution package and getting the book into retail channels. There is nothing wrong with starting locally with a first edition IF your plans are to self-publish.

You might find this approach to be unsuited to your purposes. *If it is your goal to pursue commercial publication as your first choice, then focus exclusively on that route.* But, unfortunately, even some very fine manuscripts simply do not meet the criteria for commercial publication, so a “Plan B” is not a bad thing to have.†

*Lulu.com can be used for producing some galley proofs or advance reader copies of a book that is to be more formally published. The output looks better and has better binding and is much less expensive than proof copies printed and bound by a local copy shop. It is also a good choice for producing some informal copies to share with a critique group or “beta readers” who are giving feedback on your manuscript-in-development.*

Others interested in POD publication might prefer to deal with Lightning Source, the large and well known POD printer (many printing plants, here and abroad). Using Lightning Source requires a

---

\* POD enables experimentation without purchase of hundreds of copies. But a caution from experience: order ONE copy and review it closely before sharing with anyone else. Things pop out at you that you are more likely to overlook on the computer screen or even in a print-out of the text. I’ve been through this process with several books now, and have not gotten one exactly right yet the first time through.

† My views are influenced by having read some self-published and subsidy-published books that I enjoyed and recommend to friends and to readers in general, books that were unlikely to find a home with a commercial publisher because of market realities and publishers’ priorities. I would rather see good books like that, and their hard-working authors, take an alternate route than see the manuscripts lost in a drawer.

few more steps on the part of the publisher and a set-up fee, but provides better prices on books. See [www.lightningsource.com](http://www.lightningsource.com) for details.

Sacramento's fine literary novelist Bill Pieper has published books through Lightning Source, as part of a cooperative publisher called Pacific Slope Press. Bill has found the approach to be satisfactory for his purposes, and I can attest that the output is very nice.

If you want to experiment with POD—to try your hand at book design and to see what the results look like—at minimal cost (just the printing cost of one or a few books plus some time)—try Lulu, [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com).

I learned more about POD publishing and printing from experimenting with Lulu than I could have from only reading about how it works. (Educational theorists call this “experiential learning.”) But that approach only makes sense for people who want to do the layout and design needed for a book and who have the needed skills.

See page 19 for more information on Lulu.

## 5. Subsidy and Vanity Publishing

An unclear line separates subsidy publishing from vanity publishing. I see the key difference this way:

- With subsidy publishing, the author knows that the publisher is not a standard commercial publisher and that publication is a purchased transaction
- With vanity publishing, the author is led to believe that his or her book has been legitimately published by a competitive commercial publisher, even though the author has explicitly or implicitly purchased the publication

Those definitions leave plenty of room for confusion, deception, and self-deception. Let's try to sort out the issues.

### ***Subsidy publishing***

Subsidy publishing is “vanity publishing lite.” It is a publishing model that relies on payments (subsidies) from the author in order to publish the author's book. The subsidies pay for formatting of manuscripts into book form, an ISBN, and possibly, at additional costs—which can become quite large—other services, such as editing and cover design.

In a subsidy model, the author is paying the publisher to do those things that a self-publisher would do or contract for independently, or that a legitimate commercial publisher would do in its normal course of business at its expense.

This can be a useful option for some writers, as long as they understand what they are getting for their money, what limits subsidy publishing imposes on their potential sales and recognition, and what the alternatives are.

Costs can run from one or two hundred dollars to thousands of dollars, and then the author still has to buy copies of the book for resale or hope for readers to find the books by some other means.

Usually, subsidy-published books are invisible in the book trade. They are not stocked by bookstores, although those with an ISBN might be ordered through a bookstore if the publisher has the necessary distribution arrangements. They seldom allow for the discount from list price that bookstores require—typically, 40 percent. And, the killer, they are rarely returnable by bookstores. Bookstores count on being able to return unsold books for credit. They are reluctant to stock any books without that possibility.

Typically, subsidy-published books are published via the print-on-demand (POD) model. (I am excluding old-line vanity presses here. They are a whole different kettle of fish and I'll get to them next.) POD publishers print books only after the books are ordered and paid for. They are expensive in comparison to books printed in runs of thousands of copies by way of offset presses.

## ***Vanity publishing***

Vanity publishing, an unflattering term, has a long history. Vanity publishing can be hard to distinguish from subsidy publishing, and the distinction, such as it is, is not necessarily worth the effort. The key distinction, I would suggest, is that the true vanity publisher attempts to persuade the author that it is a legitimate commercial publisher, selective and respected. The subsidy publisher is more forthright about what it is. But one glides into the other.

I'll try to sort through the key issues and the two major divisions of vanity publishing: old-style (blatantly exploitive and deceptive) and new-style (less blatantly exploitive, but still deceptive). We have already discussed what I consider to be straightforward and relatively nonexploitive subsidy publishers.\*

**Any publisher that aims its marketing and promotion to *authors* rather than to readers and that nonetheless implies in any way that it is a legitimate commercial publisher *is a vanity press*.** Some are even more deceptive or exploitive than others, but all are vanity presses. An easy tip-off is any form of invitation to “become a published author.” That is a sure sign of a vanity press. It will publish pretty much anything submitted to it, for a fee or with equivalent practices and conditions, cannot get its books into bookstores, and is held in disrepute by book reviewers, librarians, and industry professionals.

---

\* I do not consider Lulu.com to be exploitive or misleading, but authors need to carefully consider how and whether it meets their purposes. It is no panacea for authors, although it can be useful.

For an example of a genuine commercial publisher's site, look at [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com), the Random House website. That is an example of a publisher that seeks *readers* and is not trolling for naïve writers who are hunting for a publisher. In fact, it is hard to find any information there that is directed to would-be authors.

Compare the Random House site to, for example:

- [www.dorrancepublishing.com](http://www.dorrancepublishing.com) (Dorrance), or
- [www.publishamerica.com](http://www.publishamerica.com) (PublishAmerica), or
- [www.iuniverse.com](http://www.iuniverse.com) (iUniverse), or
- [www.trafford.com](http://www.trafford.com) (Trafford)

Each appeals to authors, not to readers, except incidentally—if even that. Among that list, Dorrance is old-style vanity, PublishAmerica is new-style vanity, and iUniverse and Trafford are subsidy publishers (marginal vanity publishers).

### **Old-Style vanity publishers**

The classic vanity publishers are Dorrance and Vantage. Both are familiar to readers of writers' magazines from their ads to the effect that "New York Publisher Seeks Manuscripts."

Old-style vanity presses require tens of thousands of dollars from the author up front. For that money, they design a book for the author, might provide some editing services, and print a run of the interior pages. They bind only some copies, provide some to the author as part of the package, and require the author—who has already paid for the entire process!—to purchase any additional copies himself or herself for resale.

Books with old-style vanity press imprints are immediately discarded by reviewers, are never stocked by bookstores, not purchased by or placed in libraries—even if donated—and are ignored by readers. The publication, such as it is, serves only the vanity of the author, the desire, even at high cost, to be known as a "published author."

Sadly, some books with real publishing potential find their way to old-style vanity publishers because the authors simply did not know any better or because the authors became frustrated by rejections of commercial publishers or lack of interest from agents. Remember that there are some worthwhile and readable books that do not find commercial publication. The system can be unfair that way, as commercial publishers have to look to profitability, and that means a large enough and accessible book-buying audience and manuscripts that arrive at their doorsteps in polished, professional form.

## The new style

The new style of vanity press lures authors with a promise of no fees and offer of a token advance on royalties (usually one dollar). It makes up its costs by inflating the price of books and by heavy-handed efforts to sell books in bulk (50 to 100 copies) to the authors.

For several years, PublishAmerica (PA; previously known by other names, including AmErica House) has passed itself off as a “traditional publisher,” a term the company applies to itself, and has relentlessly pursued writers through advertising and other promotions. It is the model of the new-style vanity press, and it has been very successful in luring in authors. That success through deception calls for extended comments here.

The warning signs that PublishAmerica is a vanity press include these:

- Relentless attempts to recruit authors (commercial publishers aim their promotions at readers and book-buyers).
- A policy of accepting nearly anything, no matter how badly written or how unsuited for commercial publication (commercial publishers have to be selective).
- An almost exclusive emphasis on selling books to the authors themselves rather than to the public (commercial publishers sell to the public and do not depend on author purchases).
- A company-run message board, exclusively for use by its authors, that is kept focused on cheerleading by constant monitoring, deletion of posts that question any aspect of the company, and banning of troublesome posters (commercial publishers aim their websites at the reading public).
- A policy of refusing to publish second books from authors who have not bought enough copies of their first book (commercial publishers only care that an author’s previous books have sold well enough to the public).
- “Editing” that is largely limited to running a spell checker on the manuscript, often inserting errors in the process (commercial publishers edit and proofread manuscripts before publication).
- An option to print the manuscript exactly as submitted by the author, with a disclaimer inserted on the copyright page by PublishAmerica (no commercial publisher would ever entertain such a bizarre practice).
- Exclusive use of print-on-demand (POD) technology to print books only to order (commercial publishers buy print runs in the mid-thousands to tens or hundreds of thousands).

That PublishAmerica (PA) is an unselective vanity press does not prevent it from getting its hands on some fine manuscripts. Some books published by PublishAmerica are well written and of real merit. I helped to divert one genuinely outstanding book from PublishAmerica as the contract awaited signing. That book has since been published in hardback by a small press and received some enthusiastic reviews.

Unfortunately, the good books that PA occasionally publishes are essentially unavailable to the trade, as bookstores rarely stock POD books, and PA makes ordering difficult in any event.

PA's "returnability" option reportedly comes with a five percent discount to the bookstore (in contrast to the normal trade discount of 40 percent) and a ten percent restocking fee. Bookstores cannot afford to order the books under the "returnability" clause, as they are guaranteed to lose money on them.

Only occasionally—usually because the author has made a personal request—will a bookstore stock a PA title. In those cases, the author will probably have to supply the books on consignment or with a purchase guarantee (that is, entirely at the author's risk).

Those limits of course also apply to print-on-demand titles from other publishers.

*(October 2009 update. PA has taken to charging for edits to the manuscript and for telephone access to staff, and it has developed a growing series of new author-targeted marketing gimmicks.)*

## ***Is vanity or subsidy publishing ever a good choice?***

For some writers, one of the vanity/subsidy publishers might be the only practical option for seeing the manuscript put into book form. For some writers, especially those using one of the less exploitive companies, the results might be a fair trade-off. This is a choice that only the writer can make, but one that he or she should make with a full understanding of the implications and alternatives.

### ***The odd duck: Lulu.com***

Lulu.com can be a relatively benign and useful alternative to vanity or subsidy publishing. It is not the only one of its kind, but it is popular and apparently very successful. (Wordclay is another that appears comparable, as is Amazon.com's CreateSpace.)

Lulu is primarily a POD book printing facilitator (it does not itself do the printing). However, the company has expanded its menu of services to include formatting, cover design, and more. This appears to be an evolving set of options, each of which is fee-based. Lulu will also sell the author an optional "distribution package" that includes an ISBN and certain actions to make the book available in the market (via Amazon.com, and so on). (The addition of paid services is new, and growing, since earlier editions of *The Pursuit of Publishing*. See the "Update" at the end of this section.)

The distribution package comes in two varieties. One provides an ISBN specific to the author. The other provides a Lulu.com ISBN. Recall that the owner of the ISBN is the publisher of record. If the book has a Lulu-owned ISBN, then Lulu is, formally, the publisher.

Unless the author is purchasing formatting services, Lulu requires that the manuscript already have been formatted in the way the author wants it to look—that is, the author must have done or purchased from some other party whatever layout and design, editing, proofreading, and cover design services he or she wants. Lulu does have a gallery of prefabricated covers, however, which may be used without charge. Lulu's system can convert a Word (.doc) file into an Adobe Acrobat pdf file

for printing, so the author/publisher need not make that conversion first. There is no charge for the conversion.

All the author pays for (or purchasers, wherever they might be) is the books themselves.

For authors like myself, wanting to have a small supply of printed and bound books (or booklets like this one) for personal sale and wanting to make the book available online (via the Web-based storefront), Lulu is a convenient option. I have also found it to be suited to my preferences for publication of a few general-market books. *(This is a model I have chosen on the basis of my own circumstances and style, and as satisfactory for the books I have published, but it is not a model I propose as suitable for everyone. Do your own analysis.)*

I know how to format the file, design the book layout, design a cover, and manage the several tasks required to get the book into Lulu's system for printing. Authors without those skills must either pay someone (Lulu's in-house personnel or someone else) to handle those tasks or forego the Lulu option or comparable services from other companies who have developed similar models.

**October 2009 update.** *Lulu has moved aggressively toward a subsidy publishing model by offering "Publishing Packages" at up to \$1,369, using in-house staff. (Substantially more expensive options might exist as well.). Lulu has also taken to running frequent short-term "specials" on bulk purchases, in a model reminiscent of vanity publishers. Rapid growth has led to loss of live online help and to slow or nonexistent responses to email inquiries. My own experience suggests caution, as the automated system can make mistakes that then cannot be corrected. I have to advise caution until these issues are addressed.*

## 6. Comments and Examples

You have seen what the options are. Let's lay them out in an easy-to-use way. After the questions and comments, I'll list some authors with whom I am acquainted, including some big names, illustrating some paths to success.

### **Questions and comments**

**Question:** Do you want your book to be on bookstore shelves, widely available?

**Comment:** If yes, then pursue commercial publishing. Anything else limits that possibility.

**Question:** Can you write a series of books with commercial potential?

**Comment:** If yes, then agents and commercial publishers could be more interested.

**Question:** Do you see your audience as mostly local or as friends and family? Are you content just reaching those few people?

**Comment:** If yes, then some form of vanity/subsidy publishing might be best choice. Choose the least exploitive and most economical that meets your needs.

**Question:** Do you want to run a publishing business? Are you an entrepreneur at heart? Are you willing to learn the ropes of publishing?

**Comment:** If you answer no, then you are not a candidate for self-publishing. If yes, you might be.

**Question:** Are you willing to have others review and critique your manuscript before you pitch it to an agent or commercial publisher?

**Comment:** If not, if you think your work is just fine the way it is, you are not a candidate for commercial publishing. Consider vanity/subsidy publishing. You are not a good candidate for authentic self-publishing, either.

**Question:** Can you lay out your manuscript in book format, ready to print? Or if not, are you willing to pay someone with expertise to do the layout and book design?

**Comment:** If yes, then you could (if you want to run a publishing business) self-publish. Or if you have those skills but do not want to run a publishing business and are not pursuing commercial publishing, you could have your manuscript printed as a book by Lulu.com or by Lightning Source or by a short-run book printer.

**Question:** Are you willing and able to do or contract for marketing, promotion, distribution, and other publishing-related services?

**Comment:** If not, you are not a candidate for self-publishing.

**Question:** Do you want a publisher to pay you an advance and royalties on sales?

**Comment:** If yes, you need to pursue commercial publishing.

**Question:** Are you willing to pay a publisher to publish your book and to buy copies of your own book for resale?

**Comment:** If not, you are not a candidate for vanity/subsidy publishing. If yes, then you are.

**Question:** Is your primary interest to make money on your book?

**Comment:** If yes, then you should pursue commercial publishing OR if it suits you and you have the skills AND if the book is appropriate for the purpose AND if you are willing to risk financial loss in the effort, consider authentic self-publishing.

## ***Examples of authors and their paths***

Let me give a few examples of people I know who have published in one way or another, with success already on the record or underway.

**John Lescroart**, best-selling author of a long string of legal thriller/mysteries, published by major commercial publishers, succeeded in moving from part-time writer to full-time as his books took off. (You can learn more about him at [www.johnlescroart.com](http://www.johnlescroart.com).) His writing career has now spanned decades. He is a full-time professional novelist, although he exploits other interests as well. I first met John when he was signing his books at a local conference for mystery writers and readers.

**Brenda Novak** ([www.brendanovak.com](http://www.brendanovak.com)) is an author of romance books published by one of the biggest names in publishing (especially in that genre), Harlequin, and by others. Her books are available “everywhere books are sold” as the saying goes. She is a full-time professional writer. As her website shows, she also finds time to promote her books.

Businesswoman, former bookstore owner, book author, and writer **Stephanie Chandler** ([www.stephaniechandler.com](http://www.stephaniechandler.com)) has published a book through Aventine Press, one of the best of the subsidy publishers (quite possibly THE best). That one is *The Business Startup Checklist and Planning Guide*, which draws on her business experience and expertise. Her most recent book, (as of this writing), *From Entrepreneur to Infopreneur*, also reflecting her own expertise, was published by Wiley, a major commercial publisher. Stephanie also publishes and markets e-books and has developed a book on online marketing, initially published through Lulu.com and then published in a new edition by a commercial press. (See [www.stephaniechandler.com](http://www.stephaniechandler.com) for more information.)

**Bill Teie** ([www.deervalleypress.com](http://www.deervalleypress.com)) has a business specializing in books on wildland firefighting. He sells his books nationally and internationally, and has developed supplemental products in addition to books. His is a full-time publishing business, and his books are highly regarded in the field.

**Karl Palachuk** ([www.greatlittlebook.com](http://www.greatlittlebook.com)) is a business consultant who supplements his business by writing and publishing books for businesses and consultants. Some include CD-ROM disks with forms and other information.

**Alton Pryor**, author of 17 books (and counting) mostly of regional history ([www.stagecoachpublishing.com](http://www.stagecoachpublishing.com)) publishes, promotes, and markets his books, with great success. His best seller, last I heard, had reached in excess of 80,000 copies, an enviable total even for commercially published books and astonishing for a one-man business of writing and publishing.

**Naida West**, historian, novelist, and publisher (see [www.bridgehousebooks.com](http://www.bridgehousebooks.com)) is a relentlessly professional writer as well as a thoroughly professional entrepreneur, in the business of publishing. Writing and publishing are her full-time occupation. Although success is hard to come by with independently published fiction, she has succeeded by virtue of excellence in writing and excellence in marketing and in the business end of publishing.

**Ron Barnes**, an aspiring author who has been honing his craft for years, wrote a series of short stories and novellas in the horror/fantasy vein (you can see it at <http://stores.lulu.com/rodeba1>). Because anthologies by previously unpublished writers are very difficult to sell to commercial publishers, after exploring that option Ron chose to self-publish his fine anthology via Lulu as a practical alternative that enables him to develop a local audience and also to reach out to readers elsewhere. This alternative enables Ron to “keep the day job” while promoting his writing.

The common factor here is that each of these writers produces work worth reading, and each takes the role of writer seriously. Some focus on commercial publishing, some on self-publishing, and one, Stephanie Chandler, has spanned that divide.

I could cite many more examples with whom I am acquainted and countless more I know only as a reader,\* but these should make the point that serious and professional writers have several avenues for pursuing publication. What suits one author does not necessarily suit another, and success can be found in different ways. But *the keys are professionalism and perseverance*, whatever the avenue.

Sure, there are plenty of examples of writers who have not (or not yet) managed anywhere near the success of a Brenda Novak, a John Lescroart, an Alton Pryor, or a Bill Teie. But those who aspire to success should look to the examples of those who have made the grade and those who are relentlessly pursuing success, by whichever path they have chosen. That, of course, is one reason why writers should read widely and well and should spend time in good bookstores and in libraries—to learn the range of possibilities.

Yes, by omitting failures I have “varnished” at least one or two of the planks, but those who try deserve credit for the effort. The story is not yet all told on those who are still pursuing publication: time will tell, and experience is a fine teacher.

“Overnight successes” usually have been working diligently for *years* before “overnight” arrives. How many light bulbs did Edison try before one finally worked right?

---

## 7. Sources and Resources

---

This section lists some trade and professional references and resources for writers. It is important. Read it.

A frequent complaint about budding writers (those who are learning the craft, not yet published, not yet at the level to make a living at it) is lack of professionalism in writing and in approaching the business of writing. *Most of what is submitted to publishers is not publishable.*

Often that reflects poor writing. Often it reflects that the author has sent a manuscript to the wrong publisher or wrong agent for that kind of manuscript, or has sent a manuscript to a publisher that does not accept unagented or unsolicited manuscripts. Writers need to do their homework about the publishing industry as well as about the craft of writing.

The resources listed in this section will help you to overcome those kinds of problems. Some will help you with the key steps of writing effective query letters and effective book proposals.

---

\* You might want to read articles and books by well known writers in which they tell how they succeeded as writers and discuss their writing techniques. Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, Elizabeth George, and Janet Evanovich are just a few who have written books on their craft. Many others have written articles for such magazines as *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest*.

## **Basic homework**

Go to some big bookstores, with pen and notebook. Look through the kinds of books you want to write. You should of course already be reading such books, as it is unlikely that you can write well what you do not choose to read.

Take notes on publishers. Take notes on mentions of agents in acknowledgments. Those publishers and agents are potential targets for your manuscript.

Contact publishers who publish the kind of book you have written or want to write. Ask for their guidelines for authors. (You might be able to find them on the Web.) Study the guidelines.

See which publishers accept unagented submissions. See the next section for resources, and also look at publishers' websites. Publishers that do not accept "unsolicited submissions" might read a query letter. If the publisher responds to the query with a request for a book proposal or manuscript, then the manuscript or book proposal is solicited, not unsolicited.

Look up information (see next section) on agents who have represented manuscripts like yours or are seeking the kind of thing you have written.

Keep a running list of potential agents and publishers. You can do that in a file on your PC or on plain old note cards or in a notebook. Leave room for adding comments later.

## **Hit the books**

A handful of essential reference books belong on your shelves, well thumbed, marked up, and flagged with Post-Its.

### **Trade references**

- *Writer's Market* (latest edition), published by Writer's Digest Books. This annual volume lists numerous publishers of books and periodicals and some literary agents, with useful information on what sorts of books they accept and other conditions. It also includes articles on writing and publishing.
- *Guide to Literary Agents* (latest edition). Another annual from Writer's Digest Books. It includes chapters on formatting manuscripts, writing queries, and more.
- *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents* (latest edition). This is a more selective guide, but also more detailed. It excludes periodicals, as the focus is on books. It also includes valuable articles on such topics as writing queries and book proposals.
- *The Writer's Handbook* (latest edition), published by The Writer Books. Another directory of publishers plus advice on writing. Older volumes, which might be available in libraries, can be valuable for their articles on many aspects of writing. (This annual might not be as easy to find as the ubiquitous *Writer's Market*.)
- *Literary Marketplace*. This is the comprehensive guide to publishers and literary agents. You can find it in large libraries.

If you have to pick only one, I recommend *Writer's Market*.

## Resources for finding agents and publishers

In addition to the articles in *Writer's Market* and comparable books in the previous section, the following are worth your time and money:

- *Bulletproof Book Proposals*, by Pam Brodowsky and Eric Neuhaus (Writer's Digest Books, 2006).
- *The Making of a Bestseller*, by Brian Hill and Dee Power (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2005).
- *How to Get a Literary Agent*, by Michael Larsen (Sourcebooks, 2006). Larsen is a long-established agent (Larsen/Pomada Agency).

## Books on writing

Two classics, available in the Writing or Reference section of many bookstores, belong on every writer's bookshelves:

- *The Elements of Style*, by William F. Strunk and E. B. White. A classic guide to clear, correct writing.
- *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser. This has been through seven or eight editions since its first publication, about 1974. Part One is the best short guide to clear, effective writing I have ever seen. At only about 40 to 50 pages, depending on edition, it is essential reading for writers. The book includes much more than that, of course, with chapters focusing on specific types of writing.

Some famous authors have written memoirs or discussions of their writing methods (Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, Janet Evanovich, and Elizabeth George, to name just four).

Others valuable books include manuals on clear writing—for example the long-in-print *Edit Yourself*, by Bruce Ross-Larson and *Writing with Precision*, by Jefferson D. Bates.

You can find books on writing novels, short stories, plays, screenplays, and special issues in fiction-writing such as point of view, plot, creating scenes, and more.

A terrific explanation of how and why persistence works for writers is Leonard Bernstein's *Getting Published: The Writer in the Combat Zone* (William Morrow, 1986). It is out of print, but worth finding used (try Amazon.com) or in a library. Bernstein's references to typewriters and word processors are outdated, but that does not reduce the value of his clear and specific advice.

Take the time to see what is on the shelves in larger bookstores, in your local library, offered by the Writer's Digest Books (see [www.writersdigestshop.com/](http://www.writersdigestshop.com/)), or highly recommended among books on writing at Amazon.com. Has your favorite writer written a book about how he or she writes? That might be a good book for *you* to read.

## Style manuals

Writers need at least one good style manual, and may need more than one. For example, a shorter and less expensive alternative to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, is Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (7<sup>th</sup> edition, revised by Wayne C. Booth and others, University of Chicago Press, 2007). The *Chicago Manual of Style* itself, now in its 15<sup>th</sup> edition, is widely used.

Other style manuals come from Associated Press (AP), the American Psychological Association (APA), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and other organizations. The *New York Times* publishes a style and usage guide, but it does not take the place of an all-encompassing style manual like The *Chicago Manual*.

Ask publishers you are targeting what manuals they use. This may be a more important question for nonfiction than for fiction, but both fiction and nonfiction have to follow *some* style conventions, not to mention having correct grammar, punctuation, and usage. The less that jumps out at an agent or editor saying "fix me, fix me!" the better.

A handy all-in-one pocket-size paperback is *The Oxford Essential Writer's Reference* (Berkley Books, 2005). It includes something on everything from basic grammar and punctuation to biblical quotes, proofreader's marks, and copyright procedures. At \$6.99, you cannot go wrong.

## Dictionaries of usage

You also need a good dictionary of usage. Here are two I recommend:

- *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, by Bryan A. Garner (Oxford University Press, 1998). This gets my highest recommendation. (You might have to track down a used or remaindered copy.)
- *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (Merriam-Webster, 1994, but might be out in a newer edition).

## English language dictionaries

Last, but certainly not least, you need at least one, and preferable two or three, good dictionaries of the English language. Ones I recommend include:

- *Webster's New World College Dictionary*. My father, William E. Umbach, was the etymological editor of the first three editions of that highly respected dictionary. (Etymologies are word histories, the descriptions of roots in older English or in other languages, such as French or Latin.) Currently in the Fourth Edition.
- *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. This is a large, authoritative work, supplemented with usage notes. If I had to recommend one single English-language dictionary, this would be the one, as I use mine regularly and know it to be good.

Others that might suit you include abridged versions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (or even the whole thing in a photo-reduced edition that comes with a magnifying glass), Oxford's American dic-

tionary (in a couple of editions), and the Merriam-Webster dictionaries (the huge *Third New International*, nominally “unabridged,” and the college edition). Random House also publishes a respectable college dictionary.

Do not settle for a bargain-bin edition or for a pocket-size dictionary. Buy and use at least one first-class dictionary.

## Thesauruses

A thesaurus helps you to find just the right word or phrase, in contrast to a dictionary, which tells you the meanings of words (and sometimes of phrases). A writer needs both dictionaries and thesauruses. I recommend these:

- The classic *Roget's International Thesaurus* (the full-size hardbound edition). I have at hand the fifth edition, published in 1992 by Harper-Collins. Look for the most recent edition of this widely used thesaurus.
- A recent, and superb, competitor in the field, *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus* (Oxford University Press, 2004). This is the one I recommend most highly.

## Self-publishing manuals

If you are interested in self-publishing, then study the latest edition of at least one of the two leading books on the subject:

- *Self-Publishing Manual*, by Dan Poynter (Para Publishing)
- *Complete Guide to Self-Publishing*, by Tom & Marilyn Ross (Writer's Digest Books)

Also worth a look, as it is by a prolific self-publisher who has unique insights and practical advice, all provided in 120 pages:

- *Publish It Yourself*, by Alton Pryor (Stagecoach Publishing)

## Special references

You might need specialized references on science and technology, mathematics, biology, business, or a specific period of history. That depends on the kind of writing you are doing, your characters' occupations and interests, and so on.

Enormous amounts of reference information are available on the World Wide Web (much for free, and much more, and better, through fee-based services, including those provided by local libraries), but there is still no substitute for good reference books on nearby shelves.

Dictionaries of foreign languages might be helpful, again depending on what kind of writing you are doing.

A full-size encyclopedia can be valuable. The entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is now available in CD-ROM or DVD versions at bargain prices, as low as \$30 plus tax and shipping. You can even subscribe to *Britannica's* online version. One-volume encyclopedias can be helpful for quick fact-checking.

An almanac (*Information Please* or comparable) can also be good to have on hand, especially for fact-checking.

Likewise, a good dictionary of quotations might be a good investment. A standard one is *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. Another is *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

A good atlas of the world should be at hand. The National Geographic Society publishes regularly updated editions of its atlas, but there are others to choose from. Again, this depends on what you are writing about. For your purposes, a U.S. atlas might be better, or merely some local maps, or a historical atlas. Or you might need none of these. The World Wide Web might have what you need for your purposes, or it might be that all you need is an occasional visit to the local library to look up facts.

Writer's Digest Books offers many books on special topics for writers, including books on historical periods, crime-scene analysis (for mystery writers), every aspect of fiction writing, writers' software, and much more. See [www.writersdigestshop.com](http://www.writersdigestshop.com).

Writer's Digest Books also publishes specialized market guides, such as a *Christian Writer's Market Guide* and guides for novelists, children's authors, and so on.

## **Magazines for writers**

Two magazines specifically for writers are widely read and well worth your time:

- *The Writer*
- *Writer's Digest*.

Both include articles on the craft of writing, on business aspects of writing and publishing, interviews with and commentaries by writers, and updates on markets for articles and books.

## **Trade periodicals and review venues**

For a weekly overview of the publishing industry and hundreds of reviews of forthcoming books, read *Publishers Weekly*. It is expensive, but wide-ranging in its coverage of books and publishers and of trends and issues in publishing. (*Update, April 2009: Like many magazines, Publishers Weekly is facing financial challenges and is cutting back sharply. Advertisers have sharply reduced their spending on ad pages in the magazine, and editorial content is shrinking.*)

Other important review venues include *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, and the *New York Times* (especially the Sunday book review section).

If you are aiming high, it is important to know what is being recognized as good writing, as important books.

Are you writing in a particular genre (romance, westerns, or science fiction, for example) or on some specific topic (sports, travel, or business, for example)? If so, keep up on the relevant periodicals and on what books they are reviewing.

## ***Writers' organizations***

National organizations can be an essential resource for writers, especially in specific genres. Here are some examples:

- Romance Writers of America, [www.rwanational.org](http://www.rwanational.org)
- Sisters in Crime, [www.sistersincrime.org](http://www.sistersincrime.org)
- Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, [www.sfwaw.org](http://www.sfwaw.org)

Some organizations are open to aspiring and unpublished writers, while others require a certain minimum of published books, articles, or stories. See *Writer's Market's* list of professional organizations for a helpful list.

California writers might want to consider the California Writers Club, celebrating its centennial year in 2009. It has many “branches” (local chapters) throughout the state, and is open to all writers of all levels of experience and accomplishment. See [www.calwriters.org](http://www.calwriters.org) for information.

Writers in the Northern California region, especially those with an interest in independent publishing, might wish to consider Northern California Publishers & Authors, [www.norcalpa.org](http://www.norcalpa.org). Similar organizations, such as Bay Area Independent Publishers Association, BAIPA, serve other areas throughout the country.

## ***Writers' conferences, workshops, and contests***

Regional writers' conferences and workshops bring together writers, editors, and agents, and can be a stimulating opportunity.

For one extensive and well indexed list, see <http://writing.shawguides.com>.

For information on writers' contests, see the “Contests and Awards” section of *Writer's Market*. Also watch the magazines *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest* for information on contests. One list is at [www.writers-editors.com/Writers/Contests/contests.htm](http://www.writers-editors.com/Writers/Contests/contests.htm).

---

## About the Author

---

Ken Umbach has a business of research, writing, and editing — primarily technical editing and document formatting — and related consulting, and now some publishing. He carries on an active conversation with writers locally and online and has held offices in several organizations, including Northern California Publishers & Authors and the Sacramento Branch of the California Writers Club.

During 2003-2007 Ken wrote from time to time for *Knowledge Quest*, the journal of the American Association of School Librarians. Currently he has a weekly column in a weekly Sacramento newspaper, *Senior Spectrum* ([www.senior-spectrum.com](http://www.senior-spectrum.com)).

His background has included work for the State of California, writing and editing everything from administrative regulations to departmental strategic plans as well as managing and training staff in the use of personal computers when PCs were beginning to grow in importance in state offices.

In 1993, Ken became a policy analyst with the California Research Bureau (CRB), a unit of the California State Library designated to conduct and publish policy studies at the request of the Legislature, the Governor, and occasionally other state-level officers. That role continued until 2006.

Ken wrote papers on topics as diverse as ferrets, mountain lions, “killer bees,” the Internet and its policy issues (before the Internet was a household necessity), computer technology in public schools, and social and demographic statistics of California’s Central Valley. He also edited and formatted many other CRB reports, occasionally worked with other departments on special projects, and wrote some unpublished but widely circulated pieces on teachers and technology.

Books Ken has published include:

- *Capital Crimes: 15 Tales by Sacramento Area Authors*, edited by Patricia Canterbury and Kathleen Asay
- *Melanoma Melodrama: A Medical Memoir*, by Chuck Myer
- *The Lostcreek Legacy*, by Evelyn Swift (pen name of Evelyn Luscher)
- *Wyla the Witch*, by Evelyn Swift (pen name of Evelyn Luscher)

Ken has also produced a compilation of his *Senior Spectrum* “Ken’s Corner” columns and other essays, *And a Cat Named Boo: Life in Ken’s Corner* (available via [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)).

---

Ken Umbach – Umbach Consulting & Publishing  
6966 Sunrise Blvd., #263  
Citrus Heights, CA 95610  
916-733-2159  
Ken@umbachconsulting.com  
[www.umbachconsulting.com](http://www.umbachconsulting.com)

MEMBER OF THE CITRUS HEIGHTS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND OF  
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLISHERS & AUTHORS