

Rest Stop 4: Traditional and Self-Publishing: Some Definitions

There are two main paths through the publishing world.

- Traditional publishing (with Big-5 imprints or small indie presses)
- Self-publishing

One way to understand the difference is to ask, “Who is paying for the book to be published?” In traditional publishing, the publisher is usually paying for the book to be published. In self-publishing, that cost is typically borne by the author.

Yet this is an oversimplification! The question “who is paying?” involves an assumption about what counts as payment. In a way, even authors picked up by traditional publishers must “pay” before ever getting to that point—whether that’s investing years of their life in writing, or spending money on writing workshops or conferences. Sometimes, these authors must “pay” afterward as well—especially when it comes to marketing and publicity for their book. And a self-published author who is savvy, sales-minded, and lucky can recoup their expenses and even see a profit before a traditionally published author ever earns back their advance.

A second way of thinking of the difference between traditional publishing and self-publishing is to ask, “Who has final approval (for the text, the cover design, and so on)?” In traditional publishing, the publisher typically reserves this right, because of their investment in the success of their books. Again, in self-publishing, this responsibility is typically borne by the author.

But this too is an oversimplification! Traditional publishers’ investment in the success of their books can mean they seek out works that require less of their development efforts (or interference, depending on your point of view) in the first place—and in any case, an author’s agent can sometimes negotiate certain rights of approval. And while self-publishing is directed by

the author, it's extremely rare, except perhaps in the case of the most DIY zine, for that author's creative decisions to be made in total isolation. Publishing involves the convergence of many skillsets, and the result is inevitably collaborative, to at least a small degree.

In short, publishing is complicated. Terms like "traditional publishing" and "self-publishing" are useful to a point but can take on different meanings depending on the context, or who is using them. It might be more helpful to think of publishing as a continuum, with many different entry points and end goals.

Thank you for reading. Happy writing!



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