

# THE TRUTH ABOUT SELF-PUBLISHING YOUR BOOK

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## **How hard is it to become a published author?**

I love to write. Who doesn't? In fact, if I think of it, all my life I've been writing a lot. Technical documents, sales prospects, product presentations, emails. But also songs, letters, short stories and even movie scripts.

So a year or so ago, I made the decision to write my first book.

More: to self publish it too!

What the heck, with all the free digital tools available these days, and with all the people doing it, why should I not give it a try? They say is so easy to self publish.

Or is it?

Well, if you are Guy Kawasaki or James Altucher, it probably is. Their articles about self publishing are very good and certainly helpful, but the process they use and describe tends to involve heavy usage of third-parties, thus requiring money to be spent.

In my case, the main objective was to obtain the maximum results with the minimum financial expense. Also, I wanted this to be an opportunity to learn something new. So I decided to do everything myself, and, as much as possible, using only free resources.

Sounds good to you? Wait. Before you vigorously nod in approval, let me tell you that there are hurdles along the way (read on).

So the following is the tale of how I managed to publish my first book "*Leadership, an insider guide*" ([available from Amazon](#)) and learn a thing or two about self-publishing.

## **1. The long list of DOs and DONTs (in no specific order)**

If you are thinking of self-publishing, here are some tips that will make life easier for you.

- Writing your book will be the easiest of the steps.
- Unless you're writing or assembling a photo book, keep images to a minimum, they will cause endless formatting and resolution issues, especially if you are going to print your book (see paragraph 2).
- Don't spend \$\$ on cover creation or book format conversion services: using the online cover creator provided by most publishing platforms and the free software tools they make available, you can do both yourself. Even if you are not a natural born designer, all you need is a little bit of taste and common sense. Remember your book cover will appear on the web retail sites in a very small format, so make sure title, subtitle, author are visible even then. Use images you have the right for, better still - use pictures you took yourself.
- Prepare to spend at least one week trying to build your book cover. Choosing image, layout, back cover text, author bio, colour scheme, etcetera will feel like fun in the beginning, but soon turn into a nightmare (so many options...).
- Prepare to seek information without necessarily being told what to look for. Most of the error messages you will get will be cryptic and very technical, and will not really tell you much beyond the fact that you are stuck. Be prepared to Google a lot for help and hints.
- Be prepared to iterate a lot. Publishing is not a straight process, there will be many - and I mean many - iterations, going back to your manuscript and fixing everything from typos to formatting issues to mis-aligned images.
- Edit, edit and edit some more. You will end up almost completely re-writing your book a number of times before you are happy with the final version.
- Review, review and review some more. Punctuation, formatting styles, fonts, all are going to provide challenges.

- Find somebody else to proof read your work, you cannot proof read it yourself. After a while, your familiarity with the text will get in the way with spotting mistakes and typos. Also, because you wrote it, you won't read it in an impartial way - in essence your brain will trick your eyes into reading something that is not there or is different from what it looks.
- Format, format and reformat some more. Bear in mind that if you are producing multiple versions of your book - for example print, ePub, Kindle, iBook - you will have to carefully check for formatting errors from one to the other. Don't just assume that the conversion tools you use will take care of that, because they won't.
- A word of warning on ebooks. These are by definition "re-flowable", this means that the way they show changes mainly according to the reading device in use and the font size selected by the reader. This means you have to check as many of these options as you can with every draft of your book that you generate. You can use software that simulates multiple devices (for example Amazon's Kindle Previewer), or the online tools provided by the publishing platforms themselves (for example CreateSpace), or multiple devices themselves - iPads, Android tablets and phone, iPhones, laptops, etc.
- For ebooks, refrain from using lots of URL links in your text. First, it's very distracting for readers (at least, I find it so), and second it will be a nightmare for you to check they all still work after all the rework, review and edit cycles you will go through (see above).
- When final reviewing before publishing - also called the sign-off - start checking your book from the end. The unfamiliar progression of paragraphs and chapters will help you spot stray mistakes, misalignment of text, formatting issues, etc.
- Remember that each book format requires a dedicated "cycle" (defined as edit - format - proof read - review). Don't assume that if you have your print version done and dusted you can just produce the equivalent ebook with no effort. It's not going to happen.
- Expect corrections spillovers from one book format to another: things you will correct in one format will not have necessarily been detected in a different one, so you will go back and forth between different formats.

- ISBN codes are nice to have, and most publishing platforms provide it for free. Note that is not an absolute requisite to have one. Also note that each edition (format) of your book will need to have a unique ISBN, you cannot use the same ISBN for your ebook and print versions for example, or your .mobi to .ePub versions.

## 2. Platforms and tools.

I tried pretty much all of the mainstream service providers for self-publishing. None is as easy to use as it claims. Each book template they require to be used is different. The tools that they provide and that supposedly should help you format your book, but that in reality are there so that you make the heat lifting work and not them, are all different and proprietary to their specific platform. Some are quite complex software programs with a steep learning curve - remember that being unique to a platform, the output will most likely not be re-usable somewhere else. Some of the tools are downloadable programs, which is better because you can work on your material without having to be online all the time, others are online tools only. English seems to be either the required language or the recommended one.

For some reason, every one of the companies mentioned above want you to produce your manuscript in MS Word. I work on a Mac, and I'm familiar with Pages, so that was my choice. However, when you export a file from Pages to Doc/Docx format, it simply isn't good enough for the publishing platforms. The workaround was to export from Pages to Pdf, but still the majority of platforms did not like it either.

To do the actual writing, I used Scrivener, a software (not for free) that I greatly recommend. From Scrivener I then imported my manuscript into Pages and then applied the chosen styles and formatting. I then exported to PDF and to ePub to use with the publishing platform of choice (more below).

The one free tool that I found invaluable, regardless of the platform chosen to publish your book, is *epub validator*. This is an online tool that will make sure your ebook format is complying with the latest electronic publishing standards.

Let's have a quick look at each provider:

- *Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP)*: the process is well documented online, and they provide a handy, clear and short downloadable guide on how to build your book for Kindle. They also make available a *Kindle Preview* program to check the readability of

your book on a number of Amazon devices (Kindle DX, Fire, etc.). Once you submit your ePub manuscript, you can check, using the online tool, how it will show on smart phones and tablets, including iOS and Android platforms. The book cover tool is easy and straightforward to use, although somehow limited in the font and title/author layout options.

- *CreateSpace*: they provide a very clear document on how to format your PDF for printing. They also provide an MS Word template that I was able to easily adapt for use in Pages (remember I'm a Mac guy!), and from there export to PDF with no issues whatsoever. CreateSpace provides a very organised Project Homepage for authors, taking you through the Create, Setup, Review, Distribute and Sales & Marketing stages in a clear and intuitive way. Like for KDP, the book cover tool is ok although not perfect, but it does provide a good number of choices to tweak and customise your book. The online review tool is really good, and it tells/show you in plain English any potential problem with your book and even how to fix it. Once you have published your book with CreateSpace, there's an option to send it straight to KDP and get your Kindle version, but I worked on the two separately so I cannot assess how that would work.
- *Lulu*: they actually provide an ebook to tell you how to format your ebook! Long, complex and not necessarily an interesting read - unless you are a Lulu fan. They generate several different formats of your book for a number of retail outlets, unfortunately my book ended up being incompatible with one or the other. For the Barnes & Noble format for example, I kept getting XML related errors (invalid creator XML, invalid publisher XML, etc.) and all sorts of cryptic messages. Also I had endless troubles to generate a valid NCX table of contents (basically a re-flowable table of contents specific for ebooks): it looked and worked perfectly on my Mac with both Calibre and iBook, but Lulu would not approve it. Should you decide to submit a PDF of your book, you would need to spend so much time to make it acceptable to Lulu (things like embed fonts, format page spreads, set compatibility to PDF 1.3, colour space, flatten images and transparencies, gamma grayscale, etc.) that frankly it's not worth trying (unless you are an Adobe Acrobat expert).
- *Smashwords*: in their "simple" style guide of 117 pages they recommend your manuscript to be in MS word but they accept ePub versions too. Too bad they don't tell you at the beginning that if you do submit an ePub file, it will only be available as ePub. MS

Word version can instead be exported to a number of other formats like .mobi, PDF, RTF, LRF, PalmDoc and even Plain Text!. They do provide an interesting marketing guide for your book, this is worth reading if you are not a marketing expert. As for other providers, the formatting requirements are cumbersome, and they do not necessarily work smoothly.

- *Booktango*: for some reason they want to keep all your text in just one file (so you can't upload single chapters for example and expect them to put them together) and keep your images separate, loading them into a Personal Media Library. Also, they do not accept PDFs as manuscripts (only .doc or .epub).
- *Blurb*: they require you to use a program called BookSmart. This means investing time to learn how to use it, play with it, etc. All things that are a big burden on your time.
- *Draft2digital*: on paper their requirements seemed to be the less demanding, but in reality I could never get a good and clear formatted book, running into formatting issues when converting from one format to another, especially with the positioning of the few images I used. They also wanted a PDF with embedded fonts, page size information etc., but provided little to no instructions on how to produce one.

### **3. Images**

Although DPI (dot per inch) has got nothing to do with digital image resolution, if you are using images in your book and you are going to print it, you will encounter a number of issues with them. Images normally used on the web are 72 dpi, however any printing platform will require images with a minimum DPI of 300, and in some cases will not recognise your image as such even if it is. The trick is to make sure, when changing the DPI of a picture, that you retain the original pixel dimension, which of course is the real digital resolution. Pretty much all of the providers require images to be RGB and do not accept CMYK.

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With my manuscript ready, it took me six weeks to self-publish my book in both electronic and print format. I spent zero money in the process. Overall, you need considerable technical skills and a lot of stamina to carry your challenge to completion. Many of the error messages you get from the tools are very cryptic to non guru-level-tech-people. All the

platforms have different requirements, and it's very much a game of trial and error before you get to an acceptable result.

In the end, I chose Amazon for both my ebook (KDP) and print book (CreateSpace). Even without being perfect, they turned out to be the friendlier and the best value for price (basically, free). The revenue share you get is probably not the best of the lot, but Amazon is obviously a solid and universally known company that sort of validates your credibility. Time will tell if I made the right decision or not.

### **Freebies!**

To help me produce and publish my book, I developed two simple cheat sheets that list the steps, tasks and tools used, one for the print version and the other for the ebook. These cheat sheets are now available as a free download from [leadershipthebook.weebly.com](http://leadershipthebook.weebly.com), my book website. Hope you'll find them useful!

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**Gianni Anchois** is a writer, blogger and technology enthusiast, with a background in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing. He has worked at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, holding international responsibilities across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing.