

If I Had a Time Machine: Best Advice for Self Published Authors

By Russ Haywood
September 2011

In tough economic times, unknown writers may have a rough time with publishers who are already struggling themselves... A publisher making money on an author's first book often has a near zero probability, and publishers don't have the cash for big publicity campaigns like in the golden days. Many authors are not even "successful" until the third or fourth book! Signing new authors is a gamble, and publishers don't like to gamble...

Five years ago, to self-publish meant that you either had zero skill, or were a sucker for a *Predatory Press*. Today, because publishers are so conservative, as a new author you may have to first prove that the public is interested in your book. This means self-printing and creating your own market platform by earning reviews, building a fan base, *and then finding a publisher*.

Two years ago, I set out to answer a great question: *What's happening with the Fermi Paradox?* If the Universe is so big, and life so persistent; then why are we so alone? Due to poverty and unemployment, and because I had nothing better to do, this research adventure turned into a non-fiction book, which turned into a "science fiction" book that I *needed* to share with the world. So, I found it within myself to self-publish, almost to have a beacon in my stagnate life that says "Yes, *I've done something, and here it is.*"

For those who would also share their story with the world by striking out on their own, here's my advice on how:

- 1. Explore a great story and ask great questions.**

Don't fear letting the logic of the story lift you off the face of the Earth...

- 2. Write, write, write!**

Just like any athletic or artistic skill, it may take 10,000 hours of work to become a good writer. So get to work! Sometimes the words might fall in spurts, other times in floods. Write as much as you can. Keep a little notebook nearby so you can save those spontaneous gems, and remember to "show—don't tell." *Treasure the particular details and expand them with words.* Many professional writers give themselves a daily word quota, and then stick a gun to their heads and *type*—even if what they type is crap (and word crap is *good*, roll in it), *they type*.

3. Take a two or three month break.

Make sure it's only a *temporary* break. Work on something else perhaps, or go fall in love. On your fresh-eyed return, be ready to re-write everything, and if needed... to "kill your darlings."

4. Join a writers group!

This is huge. When you're 70% done, don't be shy, venture into a group nearby or on the web. Sharing your work with friends is only so effective: they aren't always committed, they can be too nice, and if you delve into controversy they might not fully understand... Sharing work with friends may also add unnecessary stress to the relationship—but do so freely if they are genuinely interested. Joining a good writer's workshop where everyone is mutually dedicated and supportive can be very important. (Although some pros *never* do this, and the first person to read the work is an editor at a publisher.)

5. Only accept criticism that is rational and makes sense!

People aren't always as helpful as we might hope (even in a Writers Group). Grow a tough skin—yet be willing to listen willing to toss aside stabs that don't make sense. A good way to seek feedback may be to create a simple system: underline a particular passage, and write "a" for awesome, "b" for bored, "c" for confused. This method can provide very helpful straightforward reader feedback without being too controlling or hurtful.

6. Have self-imposed deadlines.

Creative work can be improved and re-sculpted indefinitely. One day you may want to move on with your life. A project can take 300% longer than you expect anyways, so you'll want a structure that helps you balance your life and maintains the relationships that count. (And with self-publishing, you *can* go back and refine things after you're "done.")

7. Find a professional local artist and graphic designer to do your cover.

We all judge a book by its cover; make sure we can judge yours properly. Give them the space to work, and don't over control. Add a link to their websites on your cover so you can mutually advertise (and get a discount).

8. Read your work aloud!

When you're finished, speak every word and listen for unnatural flow, cheesiness, and unnecessary-ness.

9. Find an editor.

The [Editorial Freelancers Association](#) is a superb place to look. Post the parameters of your work (how many words, the type of writing, etc.), and how much money you will pay, and you'll be flooded with help! This is how I found Carl Sagan's editor, Dr. Bill Barnett. (Don't expect an editor to provide the functions of a workshop.) If you rock at grammar, or have zero cash, try [Self-Editing for Fiction Writers](#).

10. Professional Layout.

The formatting of a work provides subconscious cues as to how "reputable" the author might be. Find a layout that fits the style of your work. A presidential State of the Union Address would seem a sloppy joke if it was handed to Congress on crayon--but could be a hilarious addition to a political comedy book! Spend the time to make sure the finished content has a layout that looks consistent and professional with what you want to communicate. This may take a day or two.

11. E-books!

The way of the future, eBooks be. If you have a book with complex formatting and pictures, hire a professional to set up the chapters. I spent eight hours of frustration making something that sucks. If it's a simple work, and you are *very* CPU savvy, then perhaps buy a program that can do it—and good luck with the free ones.

12. Select a printer.

So far, I've found that www.createspace.com provides the most cost effective quality. However, there are many printers.

13. START SMALL.

At first, print in batches of *no more* than twenty-five books! *Excess inventory can kill*. Imagine printing 200 books for \$1,000 and then discovering a few fatal misspellings the editor missed. Ouch. (I sold only 18 books at my WorldCon premiere and there were 5,000 participants.)

14. Get out there!

This is almost as much work as writing the book—yet unlike writing, promotions actively *bleeds money* walking into the thin air of this fantasy...

Build a good website. Write short stories within the world of your work and point them back to your text, and submit these stories to various magazines! Frolic through Bookcountry.com and GoodReads.com. Create a half-page handout that *concisely* introduces your work. Attend local and national conventions within your genre. Do small advertisements in various magazines. Find places to hand out sample chapters. Send free books to various reviewers and bloggers. Hell, start your own blog and find relevant things to talk about or causes to join. And don't go bankrupt—know when to stop... you may not be “discovered” until or third or fourth book.

15. Always act pleasant and professional.

Have an engaging, polite, courteous manner when interacting with people. This is common sense worth highlighting. You never know where a personal connection might lead. Whether with your printer, advertisers, your fellow authors, editors, your readers, or people in the halls... you will be wise to be remembered as an interesting and pleasant chat, and not the person who is rude or who throws a temper tantrum. With all the social media out there, it's easy for a bad reputation to spread like wildfire. Make sure you are continually building bridges, and not burning them to a cinder.

Sure, publishers are often organizations made up of good people, and publishers are legitimizing organizations that offer much needed editorial support; and the credibility is nice for an author. But remember, Sarah Palin has a book published by HarperCollins. Publishers practically care about money—thus a Publishing Deal *may not* necessarily offer you the introductory audience you had hoped for, and a deal offers no guarantee that your book will “get out there” (or is any good in the first place). A book deal may mean more or less money in your pocket, and the correct choice is not always clear.

When you feel that it might indeed be time to find a publisher, *start at the top of the publishing pyramid and work your way down*. Dare yourself on how many rejections you can earn, and look at the growing stack with a sense of pride that you've put yourself on the line! There are *many* reasons to receive a rejection from a publisher. Rejection doesn't necessarily mean that your story, or skill as writer is poor—it may mean that the work is simply not a proper fit for the brand, or the publishers don't perceive your likely audience as a profitable market. If you are lucky enough to catch the eye of a reputable publisher, or an *author's co-op*, think through all the details carefully. Ask the opinions of your friends. And please be *very* wary of anyone who asks YOU to provide any money upfront!

Remember: Persistence! Persistence! (and no whining about it.)

Special thanks to [Jean Johnson](#).