The process of transforming your completed manuscript into a published book has many steps. First, the book interior has to be designed. Everything from the copyright page to the index needs to be created and designed, as well as the front and back covers and the book’s spine. The back cover copy has to be written, and then all the designed parts need to be proofed for accuracy and consistency. ISBNs need to be ordered, and printing costs need to be negotiated. And all this needs to happen before the book goes to print. However, who does the actual work will depend on how you choose to publish your book.

**Print-On-Demand**

Print-on-demand or POD publishing means authors pay to have their book stored in a computer database until someone buys it. Then the book is actually printed and sent to the customer. The digital technology allows for small print runs of a few copies, rather than the larger runs required by offset printers.

Some argue that the line between print-on-demand publishing and vanity publishing is hard to discern. However, the marketplace is diverse and both reputable POD publishers and scammers exist within it. The key to making smart choices is to consider your goals. POD books are more expensive per copy than, say, a short run of your book. And oftentimes, the quality isn’t quite as good. But
opting for POD means you don’t have to pay for a few hundred books up front, and you don’t have to store boxes of books in your home or office. But, because the copies are more expensive and the POD company usually takes a cut, you won’t make as much profit on each book you sell. Plus, you won’t have an actual product to show potential buyers, unless you purchase a few copies for yourself.

**Vanity or Subsidy Publishing**

Vanity publishing has a bad reputation in the book industry. These companies ask authors to pay all the publishing costs (editing, designing, printing, etc.), and often make big promises about their marketing and publicity efforts. When in reality, the production work may be sloppy and unprofessional, and they may not follow through on their promises to make your book available on the market. And many booksellers won’t consider stocking books from vanity publishing houses because the quality is reputedly poor.

Plus, the contract terms usually weigh heavily in the publisher’s favor. They ask authors to pay all the production costs, but they retain rights and earn profits from book sales, only paying authors royalties (a percentage of the profits from sales). So in the end, authors end up paying thousands of dollars and their options for making money on their investment are extremely limited. For obvious reasons, vanity publishing reeks of a scam. But if you’re not familiar with your options, rights, and the industry standards, these companies can be hard to spot.

Anytime a publisher acquires rights, they should be the ones assuming the risk and paying the production costs. If you encounter a company that offers to
publish your book using your money for all the editing, design, and printing costs, and you’re not keeping 100 percent of the rights and most of the profits from sales, you should probably keep looking because better options exist.

**Traditional Publishing**

Nonfiction authors that go the traditional publishing route will prepare a book proposal and either approach agents or publishers with their book idea. Note that for some genres, such as memoir or fiction, the agent or publisher will want to see a completed manuscript and a pitch letter rather than a proposal. But in most cases, you can start trying to sell your book without completing it first.

When authors think of traditional publishers, they often think big advances, royalty checks, and easy living. But some authors, depending on their goals, can actually publish their own book better than any commercial publishing house could do. When self-publishing isn’t right for you, keep in mind that finding a commercial publisher has its challenges – the advances and royalties aren’t usually that big (especially not for first-time authors), and large publishing companies don’t usually have the resources to launch full-scale publicity campaigns for each book they publish. However, perhaps the biggest downside of trying to publish through a traditional house is time.

Selling your book to a traditional publisher can take months, even years to do. First, you have to get a publisher’s attention; and this can be difficult, but it’s not impossible. The key is to put together a strong proposal package and, in many cases, find an agent to represent you. Agents know how the publishing world
works, and they know what they need to do to get your manuscript in the hands of the right editors. Many traditional publishing houses are so overwhelmed with submissions that they refuse to look at anything not represented by an agent. So this adds another step to your publishing efforts – you need to find an agent before you can even start looking for a publisher.

The good news is that once you find an agent, he or she will likely do all the actual negotiating and selling on your behalf. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that your manuscript will be sold in a timely fashion, or even sold at all. Finding an agent brings you one step closer, but it doesn’t guarantee anything. And once your book is sold, you will likely have to wait another year or more before you can actually hold a copy of your book in your hands.

Traditional publishing is not a bad way to go, but it isn’t always the best way. Although it does save you the cost and time of proofing, designing, and printing your books, you have to expend time and money to get your book into the hands of agents and potential publishers. You may have to hire an editor or book doctor to make the manuscript more marketable. Once you do sell your book, then you have to negotiate the rights and terms of the contract, and wait another year or so before your book is actually published. And in the end, your book’s success will still depend on your own publicity and marketing efforts. So if you are publishing your book to further your expertise and build your business, then traditional publishing may not be the most cost-effective way to go.

**Self-Publishing**
Self-publishing, in its truest sense, means creating and operating a publishing company, and this takes a lot of work. But if you do it the right way, you can create a lucrative business. Ideally, you take the time to research and create a quality product. Then you coordinate its production, promotion, and sales. You, or someone you contract, proofreads, formats, designs, prints, and distributes the book. You keep track of your expenses, collect sales tax, accept credit cards, and ship your books to consumers and distributors.

When your books are printed and bound, they will arrive on your doorstep, and then you have to store, sell, and distribute them to buyers. You have to market the book, and look for publicity opportunities—the same as you would with any other publishing avenue. You have to petition the book buyer who orders for your local bookstore to purchase a few of your books, and then you have to accept them back if they don’t sell in a reasonable amount of time. Self-publishing is like starting and running your own business, even if it is just a part-time venture.

With the growing self-publishing industry, many independent contractors exist who can provide some of these services. You can hire a freelance proofreader and designer, or even someone to coordinate the entire process on your behalf. With the industry booming, you have many options for how to get things done. The key is to keep in mind that this is a business venture, and you’re in charge of its success or failure.

**Electronic Publishing**
The internet has made electronic publishing a popular way for authors to sell their information and expertise without forking out huge production and publishing costs required to publish a physical book. A resourceful author can design and produce a salable informational product without paying someone to typeset and print an actual book. The result is an e-book, or electronic book, that can be sold and distributed via download online.

Opting to publish electronically presents its own set of benefits and challenges. Making your book an e-book is a great way to test your market on the cheap before investing in the paper publication process. You can write and publish your e-book, market it on your Web site and in other online outlets, and see how well it sells. You can elicit feedback and suggestions from your readers and peers, and then take all their input into consideration before you put your work in a less flexible, physical form. You can sell your e-book for nearly the same cost as you can sell a physical book, and your profit margins are much higher because producing an e-book costs very little when compared to printing and producing other books. All you really need to produce and sell an e-book is PDF software and a Web site with traffic. And if your e-book sells well online, you can make the decision later to print and market a physical version.

However, the e-book market is different from the physical book market – the competition is different, the experience of reading an e-book is different, and you have to appeal to your readers in a different way. You will be selling almost solely to the online market, rather than the brick-and-mortar bookstore market (where a majority of books are still sold, even in the internet age). E-books are a relatively
new concept, so you have to deal with customers that are unfamiliar with the idea of buying a downloadable book. But this challenge may ease as more and more people go online to find the information they need.

By creating an e-book, you cannot pass your book out in person to clients and associates. All you can do is direct people to your Web site and hope they follow through on your invite to visit and download your book. So, essentially, you’re missing out on the “calling-card” aspect that a physical book offers, unless, for example, you decide to couple your e-book with a print-on-demand version or make copies of your e-book available on a disk. This will allow you to order a handful of copies to take to conferences and trade shows.

Overall, electronic publishing is so easy and cost-effective, that taking this route is almost risk-free. It may be something worth trying, if not now, then possibly in the future with bonus supplements to your physical book, or a different project altogether. You can also create a free e-book version of your physical book to use as an online marketing tool, and this strategy has proven to be very effective. The electronic publishing possibilities are endless.

**What’s Right for You?**

Regardless of what publishing route you decide to take, the key to navigating it is read any and all contracts you encounter throughout the process. Make sure you get to know the business, and consult with a lawyer who knows it as well. You need to know and understand the following parts of the process.
1. Rights – Traditional publishers purchase rights to your book when they decide to publish it. They assume the risk, and therefore retain certain rights. Exactly what rights, and for how long they will be held should be explained in your contract negotiations with any publishing company or publishing services firm. In theory, you want to retain as many rights as possible. And if a publishing company retains rights, they should be paying for them. If copyrights and publishing law are new to you, talk to a lawyer.

2. Editorial and Design Control – When you enter into any agreement with any publisher, someone will get editorial and design control. And that person gets final say on what goes into the book, and what goes on the book’s cover. If you have a particular cover in mind, then you’ll want design control. But more importantly, if you want complete and final say over your book contents, then a traditional publisher might not be for you—some will exert editorial control. In any self-publishing arrangement, you should get final say on all editorial and design decisions.

3. Money – If you’re selling your book to a traditional publisher, then you probably won’t get much say in how much money they offer you, although it never hurts to try. But if you’re going to be paying a publishing services firm to publish your book, then doing your homework and comparing prices will save you serious money. The company should give you an itemized list of everything you’re getting when you sign with them. Also talk to someone at the publishing company about what services they don’t supply.
For example, if they don’t have someone on staff that writes back-cover copy, then you’ll need to write it yourself, or hire someone do it for you. And even if a company says they have experts on staff to handle the copyediting and design work, ask for samples. You may be able to get a higher level of quality if you go with an independent freelancer. Reputable companies will be used to working with freelancers, and likewise, experienced freelancers will know how to work with other service providers. You should look at where you can get the most value for your money—and this is not necessarily the cheapest.

The self-publishing industry is a difficult landscape to navigate, especially if you’re not sure what you’re doing. Everyone’s heard at least one story about the self-published author that got screwed out of thousands of dollars and wound up with a second-rate product. And no one wants a negative publishing experience—your book is important. So become an educated consumer, and keep in mind that anything that sounds too good to be true, probably is.