



Self-Publishing Digital Books: Options, Considerations, and Insights

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By **Brian R. Huffman**

Digital self-publishing is on the minds of many authors and institutions these days. In fact, according to "Self-Published Books: 'An Empirical Snapshot,'" published in April 2012 in *The Library Quarterly*, "The number of books published by authors using fee-based publication services, such as Lulu, AuthorHouse, and others, is overtaking the number of books published by mainstream publishers, according to Bowker's 2009 annual data."

As Guy Kawasaki and Shawn Welch share in their book, *APE: Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur - How to Publish a Book*, authors are no longer at the whims of traditional publishers. But I would be remiss if I didn't inform you at the forefront that the whole e-book market is rapidly evolving. Today's advice is subject to change.

This article addresses initial considerations and presents possible applications and publishing models that are presently available. A discussion of how self-publishing fits into the spectrum of social media versus academic publishing is also included.

Initial Considerations

Before delving into the finer nuances of digital self-publishing, there are some preliminary issues that need to be considered:

- **Ease and convenience.** You should think about both your audience and the expertise and ability you possess. If you lack technological savvy, you may want to let others do the transformation from text to electronic format. Make sure the format you choose is accessible to the individuals who will most likely be reading your work.
- **Where and how will it be distributed?** Is this work for students, lawyers, or the general public? What is the best method of distribution that will enable your readers to find your work?
- **Do you want to sell the publication?** The issues of digital rights, copyright, and the opportunity to earn income from the sale of your work also come into play.

Creation Applications

The first step to publishing your book is to make use of a program which will convert your text file (it could be a Word document or a WordPad text file) into a recognizable electronic format. E-books that are read on Kindle readers, Nooks, and iPads are in a different file format that is similar to HTML. The open standard for e-books is the EPUB file format. You will also have the opportunity to create your own book cover.

Some of the applications I recommend include [Mobipocket eBook Creator](#), [Calibre](#), and [Sigil EPUB Editor](#). These applications allow you to alter the text after you import it. You can make changes so the text is more appealing for electronic reading devices. It is also possible to make use of tables of contents and indexes.

Some practical advice that I learned along the way: Bring the text into your app with as little formatting as possible. Remove unnecessary tabs, indentations, and block quotes, and make sure your paragraphs are text-wrapped and not hard-returned. The result will be far easier to read and manipulate within the creation application. If you clean up your document, you can save it into rich text format (RTF) and then import it into your app. If all else fails and you have a large book with formatting nightmares, you can save it into simple text (TXT) and know it will easily import.

You must also consider copyright and digital rights management (DRM). Authors may choose to apply DRM to their e-books in order to prevent their work from being copied, distributed, or printed. Adobe Digital Editions is one example of a DRM protection scheme for EPUB books.

Publishing

Citation, ability to locate via online searching, and distribution are the primary goals for self-publishing. Following are five suggested models of self-publishing:

1. **Digital Commons.** Free, open web hosting via a digital commons repository. These repositories are usually available to all faculty, staff, and students. Through the repository it is possible to publish your e-book publically to the web. Benefits include full-text search and discovery in web search engines like Google, the ability to track download stats, and the ability to generate a permanent URL to your work for long-term citation and access. Many academic libraries make use of these already.
2. **Creative Commons (CC).** Works can be released with a CC license for maximum sharing and creative reuse. CC allows the author to communicate which rights they reserve and which rights they waive for the benefit of recipients or other creators. This model is ideal for those who want a low-cost copyright system. A CC license enables much greater exposure and visibility while avoiding lost revenues when compared to similar books under traditional licensing.
3. **CALI.** Another option is CALI's own publishing arm, [eLangdell](#). I recommend this service to law faculty interested in publishing a course book or supplement electronically if they are looking for a wider audience. It is a nationwide digital commons for law professors.
4. **Online e-book retailers.** If the goal is to earn income and sell your book through a more traditional distribution system, then an online e-book retailer may be perfect. There are four main players in the market: Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing ([discussion forums](#) for more information), [Google Books](#), [iBooks Author](#), and Barnes & Noble's [PubIt!](#)
5. **Paid Services.** For those who may lack the time and technological ability, there are full-service providers that will take your text file, parse it into tables of contents and indexes, create cover images, convert it into the format best intended for your audience, and market it for you—all at a price. It's a "turnkey solution". Three services you may want to look into are [Lulu](#), [CreateSpace](#), and [Smashwords](#). Lulu and CreateSpace can also do print on demand for monographs.

How to Take Advantage of this Phenomenon

Faculty can self-publish scholarly works to expedite the publication process and lessen the cost. A larger audience can be reached with removal of the paywall established by legacy publishers. In addition, unless the institution has other provisions and policies, faculty would keep all rights to their work. Another advantage is that faculty can publish at their own pace with no deadlines from publishers. This is ideal for their professional development and creates works that become highly portable. Digital publishing makes it easy to make changes to the content and republish.

Library directors could consider publishing works owned by the academic institution. The library can save shelf space and make use of added features available with e-book technology. The ease of making changes to the content and republish is highly appealing. The law school can sell the works and produce a profit from sales and royalties.

Students would benefit from instant access, ease of use, and improved searching capability, and someday they may even save on the price of costly text books.

Lawyers could publish their own books concerning topics on which they have expertise. Digital self-publishing would be a way for them to share their knowledge and self-market. Lawyers could create materials for continuing legal education and skip print publication and let their attendees read the publications electronically. Professional associations could publish newsletters and professional journals intended to be read on e-readers.

Public law libraries could author library guides on topics that would help their patrons. The library could create self-help materials for patrons, from lawyer to pro se litigants. The library, with permission from speakers, could assemble and digitize handouts and presentation of public speakers for use by library patrons and arrange them by legal topic. Legal forms could be assembled and put into digital format.

Is Self-Publishing Similar to Social Media or Blogging?

One might think creating content intended to be read on an electronic device is much akin to social media or blogging. The answer lies in the audience and the intended use of the publication. The discussion of publishing evokes ideas of writing style standards, marketing, and distribution. These models are not generally considered with social media. Digital self-publishing is more than posting on the internet. At the least, it involves attention to the device meant to read the text. On the other end of the spectrum, the author is putting his or her name on a work that can be cited. The author's reputation and knowledge is on display in connection with a self-packaged product. One could say there is a form of "peer review" at play if the author is a member of a profession. There is such a rich history of citation and publication that makes content designed for a book, albeit an e-book, much more similar to a scholarly work. The e-books could have editions, multiple authors, and bibliographies. This book-like nature seems separate from the newspaper-feel of blogging and personal letter-writing nature of social media.

Editorial Services or Not?

If there is one cautionary piece to this article, this is it. I hadn't even considered the need for an editor when I wrote the first draft of this article. It was brought up when I submitted it for publication. I suspect other authors may also neglect the need for editing.

Why hire an editor? You can do it yourself, right? Unless you have experience editing, your need for an editor may be self-evident if you ever review your emails or social media posts. If you are like me, they may be full of spelling and grammatical errors and missing words. Sometimes the expressions or sentences we write don't convey the message we mean.

Simply put, if you want a quality piece and it is for a professional purpose, an editor is paramount. Finding an editor can be as easy as looking online or consulting a publication you read and asking the staff for recommendations. There are sites, such as guru.com, where you can put projects up for bid. Even craigslist can be an excellent source for locating an editor.

Go Forth and Publish!

The tools exist, and there is a growing audience for your works. If you feel so inclined, I recommend you turn that article or presentation into an e-book and find a place to distribute it. It has never been so easy to publish your own books.

For your reference, here are two examples of publications that have been self-published in digital format: [Federal Rules by Legal Information Institute](#) and [Massachusetts Trial Court Rules](#).

I hope this article has been useful and generates interest from future self-publishers!

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Further Reading

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