

Self-Publishing Terms in Plain English

A friendly glossary for authors who want clarity without the publishing fog machine.

Use this resource when a publishing term sounds more complicated than it needs to be. The definitions are intentionally short, practical, and reader-friendly, because your book deserves momentum, not a jargon traffic jam.

Created for authors, aspiring authors, and independent publishers.

How to Use This Glossary

Publishing has its own vocabulary, and some of it sounds as if it escaped from a committee meeting and refused to come home. This glossary gives you quick, plain-English meanings so you can make confident decisions as you prepare, publish, and promote your book.

- Skim the sections that match your current stage.
- Circle unfamiliar terms before you upload or approve files.
- Keep the glossary nearby when speaking with editors, designers, formatters, or publishing platforms.
- Use the notes area at the end to track questions for your publishing support person or project file.

Plain-English note: This resource is educational, not legal, tax, or financial advice. When ownership, contracts, copyright, or taxes are involved, bring in the right professional. It is cheaper than confusion wearing a cape.

Publishing Setup & Ownership

Term	Plain-English Meaning
ISBN	A unique number that identifies a specific edition and format of a book, such as paperback, hardcover, or eBook. Each format usually needs its own ISBN.
Imprint	The publishing name connected to the book. For independent authors, this can be a business name, publishing brand, or the default imprint assigned by a platform.
Publisher	The person or company responsible for making the book available to readers. In self-publishing, the author often acts as the publisher.
Author	The person credited with writing the book.
Pen Name	A name an author uses publicly instead of, or in addition to, their legal name.
Copyright	The legal protection for the original words and creative work in a book. It belongs to the creator unless it has been transferred by contract.
Copyright Page	The page near the front of the book that lists copyright notice, publisher details, ISBN, edition notes, and other publication information.
Edition	A version of a book. A revised edition usually means the content has been meaningfully updated since the previous version.
Format	The way the book is produced or sold, such as paperback, hardcover, eBook, audiobook, or large print.
LCCN	A Library of Congress Control Number used by libraries to catalog books. It is optional for many self-published books.
CIP Data	Cataloging information prepared for libraries, usually before publication. Many independent authors use a simplified publisher-provided cataloging block instead.

Manuscript, Editing & Book Structure

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Manuscript	The written draft of the book before it becomes a finished, formatted publication.
Front Matter	The pages before the main content, such as title page, copyright page, dedication, table of contents, foreword, and introduction.
Back Matter	The pages after the main content, such as acknowledgments, resources, author bio, discussion questions, endnotes, or next-step offers.
Table of Contents	A list of the book's chapters or sections and where they begin.

Publishing Tips Made Simple

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Foreword	An opening note written by someone other than the author, usually to lend context, credibility, or endorsement.
Preface	A note from the author explaining why the book was written or how it came to be.
Introduction	The opening section that welcomes readers into the book and explains what they can expect.
Acknowledgments	A section where the author thanks people who helped with the book.
Appendix	Extra material placed at the end of the book because it supports the content but would interrupt the flow if placed in the main chapters.
Endnotes	Notes placed at the back of the book or chapter to cite sources or add explanations.
Developmental Edit	A big-picture edit focused on structure, audience, content gaps, chapter order, and whether the book delivers its promise.
Line Edit	An edit that improves flow, clarity, rhythm, tone, and sentence-level expression.
Copyedit	An edit focused on grammar, punctuation, consistency, word choice, and style details.
Proofread	The final check for typos, missing words, formatting slips, and small errors before publication.
Style Sheet	A document that tracks editorial decisions, such as spelling preferences, capitalization, punctuation choices, names, and recurring terms.

Interior Formatting & Design

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Interior File	The finished file for the pages inside the book, usually uploaded as a PDF for print books.
Book Formatting	The process of arranging the manuscript into a professional book layout with headings, margins, page numbers, spacing, and chapter openings.
Trim Size	The final physical size of a printed book after the pages are cut, such as 5 x 8, 5.5 x 8.5, or 6 x 9 inches.
Margins	The blank space around the edges of each page. Proper margins keep text readable and away from the binding.
Gutter	The inner margin near the binding. Books need enough gutter space so words do not disappear into the fold.

Publishing Tips Made Simple

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Bleed	Extra image or background area that extends beyond the trim edge so artwork can run cleanly to the edge after cutting.
No Bleed	A layout choice where all text and images stay safely inside the page margins and do not extend to the page edge.
Page Count	The total number of pages in the finished interior file. It affects spine width, printing cost, and sometimes pricing.
Running Header	Small text at the top of book pages, often showing the book title, author name, or chapter title.
Folio	The page number in a book.
Widow	A short final line of a paragraph stranded at the top of a page. Designers try to avoid it when possible.
Orphan	A short opening line of a paragraph left alone at the bottom of a page. Also something designers quietly hunt down.
Font Embedding	Including font information inside a PDF so the file prints correctly even if the printer does not have those fonts installed.
Reflowable Layout	An eBook layout where text adjusts to the reader's screen size and font settings.
Fixed Layout	An eBook layout where pages stay visually fixed, often used for children's books, cookbooks, workbooks, or image-heavy books.

Book Metadata & Discoverability

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Metadata	The behind-the-scenes book information that helps retailers, libraries, and readers understand and find the book.
Title	The main name of the book. It should match consistently across the cover, interior, retail listing, and metadata.
Subtitle	A supporting line that clarifies the book's promise, audience, topic, or benefit.
Series Title	The name used when a book belongs to a connected group of books.
Book Description	The sales copy that appears on the retail page. Its job is to help the right reader recognize that the book is for them.
Blurb	A short promotional description of the book. People often use this word for the retail description or back-cover copy.

Publishing Tips Made Simple

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Categories	The subject areas or bookstore shelves where the book is placed, such as business, memoir, self-help, or writing.
BISAC Code	A standardized subject code used in the book industry to classify a book's topic or shelf location.
Keywords	Search phrases that help readers find the book online. Good keywords reflect what readers are actually looking for.
Contributor	Anyone credited for a role in the book, such as author, editor, illustrator, foreword writer, narrator, or translator.
Author Bio	A short description of the author's experience, credibility, and personality. It should support reader trust without becoming a life history in sensible shoes.
Comparable Titles	Books similar in audience, topic, tone, or market. They help clarify where a book fits.
Target Reader	The specific person most likely to need, enjoy, or benefit from the book.

Cover & Printing Terms

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Cover File	The finished file for the book cover. Print books usually need a full wraparound cover; eBooks usually need a front-cover image.
Cover Wrap	The full print cover layout that includes the back cover, spine, and front cover in one file.
Front Cover	The first thing readers see. It usually includes title, subtitle, author name, and visual design.
Back Cover	The back of a print book, often including description, author bio, endorsements, barcode, and publisher information.
Spine	The narrow edge of a print book visible on a shelf. Spine width depends on page count, paper type, and trim size.
Barcode	The scannable code on a print book that usually contains the ISBN and may include pricing information.
Matte Cover	A cover finish with a soft, low-shine surface.
Gloss Cover	A shiny cover finish that often makes colors appear brighter.
Case Laminate	A hardcover style where the design is printed directly onto the hard cover instead of using a separate dust jacket.

Publishing Tips Made Simple

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Dust Jacket	A removable paper cover wrapped around a hardcover book.
Perfect Binding	The common paperback binding where pages are glued into a wraparound cover.
Saddle Stitch	A booklet binding using staples along the fold. It is common for shorter booklets, not full-length paperbacks.
Paper Weight	The thickness or heaviness of the paper. It can affect feel, page bulk, printing cost, and show-through.
Cream Paper	Off-white paper often used for novels and narrative nonfiction because it can feel warmer and softer to read.
White Paper	Bright paper often used for workbooks, business books, technical books, and image-heavy interiors.
Proof Copy	A sample printed copy ordered before publication so the author can check the cover, interior, margins, images, and overall quality.
Author Copy	A copy the author buys, often at printing cost plus shipping, after the book is published or approved.

eBook & Digital Publishing Terms

Term	Plain-English Meaning
eBook	A digital version of a book read on an eReader, tablet, phone, or computer.
Kindle eBook	An eBook sold through Amazon for reading on Kindle devices or Kindle apps.
EPUB	A common eBook file format accepted by many publishing platforms and retailers.
MOBI	An older Kindle file format. Most modern Kindle publishing workflows now rely on EPUB or platform conversion.
DRM	Digital Rights Management, a setting intended to limit unauthorized copying of an eBook. It is optional on some platforms and not a perfect force field.
File Conversion	Changing a manuscript or layout file into the format required by a publishing platform, such as PDF or EPUB.
Look Inside	A retail preview feature that lets shoppers sample part of the book before buying.
Sample	A free preview portion of an eBook that helps readers decide whether to purchase.
Alt Text	A written description of an image that improves accessibility for readers using screen readers.

Amazon, Retail, and Distribution Terms

Term	Plain-English Meaning
KDP	Kindle Direct Publishing, Amazon's self-publishing platform for publishing eBooks, paperbacks, and hardcovers.
Bookshelf	The dashboard inside KDP where an author creates, updates, prices, and monitors book projects.
ASIN	Amazon's internal product number. Kindle eBooks receive an ASIN; print books may show both an ASIN and an ISBN.
KDP Select	An optional Amazon program for Kindle eBooks that offers promotional tools and Kindle Unlimited access in exchange for digital exclusivity during the enrollment period.
Kindle Unlimited	Amazon's subscription reading program. Authors are paid based on pages read when eligible books are enrolled through KDP Select.
Expanded Distribution	An option that may make a print book available to booksellers, libraries, and online retailers beyond Amazon, usually through distribution partners.
Wide Distribution	Publishing a book beyond Amazon, often through retailers such as Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Google Play, libraries, or aggregators.
Aggregator	A service that sends an author's eBook or print book to multiple retailers or library platforms from one account.
Retailer	A store or platform that sells books directly to readers, such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple Books, or Kobo.
Wholesaler	A company that supplies books to bookstores, libraries, or retailers. Wholesalers usually serve the trade, not individual readers.
Distributor	A company or platform that helps move books into sales channels. Distribution can be digital, print, bookstore, library, or a mix.
Print-on-Demand	A printing model where a book is printed after someone orders it, instead of requiring the author to buy boxes of inventory in advance.
Royalty	The author's share of money earned from a book sale after the platform, retailer, printing, or distribution costs are deducted.
List Price	The public price set for the book before retailer discounts or promotions.

Launch & Author Platform Terms

Term	Plain-English Meaning
Publication Date	The official date a book becomes available or is listed as published.
Preorder	A setup that lets readers buy or reserve the book before the publication date.
Launch Team	A group of early supporters who help spread the word, share posts, and sometimes leave honest reviews after publication.
ARC	Advance Reader Copy, an early version of the book shared before publication for feedback, endorsements, or review consideration.
Beta Reader	An early reader who gives feedback on the manuscript from a reader's point of view.
Editorial Review	A review from a professional reviewer, publication, or recognized source. It is different from a customer review.
Endorsement	A short statement of support from a credible person, often used on the cover, website, or book description.
Reader Magnet	A free resource offered to attract the right readers to an email list, such as a checklist, guide, sample chapter, or worksheet.
Lead Magnet	A free download or offer used to invite visitors to join an email list.
Call to Action	A clear next step you ask the reader to take, such as download a guide, join a list, leave a review, or book a call.
Sales Page	A web page designed to explain the book's value and encourage a reader to buy, download, or join a list.
Author Page	A public profile page on a retailer or website where readers can learn more about the author and find other books.
Review Copy	A copy sent to a potential reviewer with the understanding that any review should be honest and voluntary.
Reader Review	A review posted by a reader or customer on a retail site, book platform, blog, or social channel.
Backlist	An author's previously published books that continue to be available for sale.
Frontlist	New or upcoming books currently being promoted by a publisher or author.

