

Book Proposal

The Business of Being a Writer

by

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Table of Contents

Overview	2
Target Audience	4
Competing and Complementary Books	6
About the Author	9
Marketing & Promotion	11
Chapter Outline	14
Sample Chapter	19

Overview

Every year, thousands of creative writing graduates have a dream of writing and publishing full-time, yet haven't been trained on how to make that dream a reality, even on a part-time basis. Even working writers have only a rudimentary understanding of how the publishing and media industry works, and professors too often shy away from addressing business issues in the classroom, instead directing students to other resources or, at best, offering guidance during office hours to those who insist. Unfortunately, many teachers themselves are out of touch as to what it takes to build a career in a digital era of authorship, when there's more competition—and confusing advice—than ever.

The Business of Being a Writer helps the early-career writer develop a realistic set of expectations as they head into the workforce, and offers them the tools they need to pursue a meaningful career in writing and publishing. For better or worse, writing students sometimes end up by default in graduate programs, pursuing an MFA or MA in writing or publishing, or an advanced journalism degree, when they see no better career path or job opportunity. But graduate writing degrees have little or no impact on earnings potential or industry knowledge, so this guide is as much for the person who has made the graduate school decision already (or even completed their degree) as it is for the person contemplating that decision. The pros and cons of advanced degrees will be covered, and how to make the most of their advantages and opportunities.

While the book will discuss how the publishing industry is undergoing a range of transformations, it is primarily focused on the business principles that underlie writing and publishing success regardless of what changes lie ahead. Writers will gain a comprehensive understanding of the publishing landscape and how they can best position themselves for success over the long term.

This guide focuses on concerns most relevant to writers of book-length work and early-career freelancers, as well as writers of poetry, essays, and short stories. It will discuss skills and business models to be aware of in online and literary journalism—and how that profession is evolving, particularly as it affects the magazine industry and online media—but this is not a guide that teaches journalistic skills. Rather, it shows what’s possible for someone with skills and experience in writing. It also will not detail the scholarly or professional writing sectors (legal, business, technical), although such forms will be mentioned as potential income sources and areas for exploration.

While knowing about the business of writing and publishing may not help a mediocre writer, or allow any author to skip important stages of creative development, it can help reduce anxiety and frustration, as well as help writers avoid bad decisions—which are often based on bad assumptions. Too many writers are led astray by trends, loud opinions, and industry stereotypes. *The Business of Being a Writer* helps writers understand the most important concepts of the business they want to work in, and evaluate news and trends with wisdom and clarity. While there aren't any hard and fast “rules” to the game—there are many eccentricities and exceptions to every formula—it helps to know the common business models and patterns behind successful authorship and publication. Writers will feel more empowered and confident to navigate the industry, and know how to build *their own* plan for career development.

Target Audience

The primary audience for this book is the creative writing community represented by the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), which includes more than 500 creative writing programs and 50,000 members, in addition to hundreds of writing centers and organizations. Its annual conference attracts more than 12,000 people from all corners of North America.

This guide will be useful for writers regardless of their preferred genre, but focuses on creative and literary writing, including fiction, poetry, creative and narrative nonfiction, and more literary forms of journalism. Writers trained primarily as journalists will find useful information in this guide as well (especially those seeking a more big-picture understanding of the publishing industry), but it speaks most directly to creative writers who, whether by intention or accident, find themselves in freelance or journalism positions, particularly working with online media companies (e.g., BuzzFeed, Fusion, The Awl, Atlantic.com). For example, this book would be ideal for students in writing programs now offering specialized degrees in literary journalism and digital media, such as the NYU's degree in "literary reportage" offered through its journalism school, or USC's advanced degrees combining digital media and writing.

While this book targets the early-career writer or creative writing student, an important secondary audience includes the aspiring adult who is returning to the dream of writing and publishing. Such a person is likely a reader of *Writer's Digest*, *Poets & Writers*, or *The Writer* magazine, as well as a follower of a few of the many online writing sites, and has probably attended at least one writing conference. (At any point in time, there are more than 1,200 writing conferences and retreats listed and publicized through ShawGuides.com.)

Interest in the business side of the writing life has grown as more students graduate from BFA/MFA programs in creative writing, and find themselves ill-prepared for what comes next,

and sometimes competing for a handful of teaching positions. Online articles that speak to the difficulties often break out and go “viral,” such as:

- [“The Value of Writing Programs: On Why I Don’t Have an M.F.A.”](#) by Hannah Gersen (The Millions, April 27, 2015)
- [“Why Writers Love to Hate the M.F.A.”](#) by Cecilia Capuzzi Simon (New York Times, April 9, 2015)
- [“Sponsored By My Husband: Why It’s a Problem That Writers Never Talk About Where Their Money Comes From”](#) by Ann Bauer (Salon, Jan. 24, 2015)
- [“My Amazon Bestseller Made Me Nothing”](#) by Patrick Wensink (Salon, March 15, 2013)

The ongoing conversation (or controversy) can also be witnessed in the publication of books such as *MFA vs NYC* (an anthology from the editors at *n+1*); the emergence of Binders Full of Women Writers on Facebook, to offer a professional support network; and of course the magazine I launched to help address the issue, *Scratch*, which had 900 paid subscribers when it folded after two years of publication via iOS app and website.

Competing and Complementary Books

As the former publisher of *Writer's Digest*, I'm well-acquainted with the many resources available to help writers with the business side of the writing life. Most of these can be categorized as follows:

- How to get a book published and/or how to self-publish
- Annual market guides or directories, such as *Writer's Market*, which offer specific submissions information and instructions
- Niche guides, such as how to write a query, how to write a book proposal, how to be a freelance writer, etc.

Most guides on the market will be complementary to *The Business of Being a Writer* rather than directly competitive. Currently, there aren't any comprehensive guides that introduce writers to the publishing industry—covering books, magazines, and online formats—and show them the principles of building a sustainable career. Most career guides are for aspirants who want to make as much money in as little time as possible; such titles usually lack credibility or professionalism, particularly if they're to be used in a classroom environment or by someone on the more serious, literary side of the publishing spectrum. Therefore, this following title list focuses on the more professional, comprehensive, and respected books that would be comparable to a guide published by a university press.

Writer's Market Guide to Getting Published (Writer's Digest, 2010), by the editors of *Writer's Digest Books*. \$19.99 paperback, 368 pages. ISBN 978-1582976082. One of the only guides that addresses both book and magazine publishing, as well as the ins and outs of freelancing, self-promotion strategies, self-publishing, contract negotiation, and more. This

guide is usually updated and re-released by Writer’s Digest every 5-10 years. Given how much has changed in publishing since 2010, it’s starting to feel dated.

The Business of Writing: Professional Advice on Proposals, Publishers, Contracts, and More for the Aspiring Writer (Allworth Press, 2012), by Jennifer Lyons. \$19.95 paperback, 304 pages. ISBN 978-1581159172. More anthology than guidebook, *The Business of Writing* offers insight into the publishing industry for writers seeking a traditional book deal. It stitches together a few dozen essays with people inside the industry, and offers interviews with authors, editors, and agents. As with most contributor-based books in the how-to market, it’s a patchwork of advice that sometimes coheres, sometimes doesn’t.

The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship and the Writing Life (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) by Lori A. May. \$19.95 paperback, 208 pages. An excellent guide to literary citizenship, which is currently the most popular and palatable way for creative writing students to pursue platform building, self-promotion, and other long-term marketing strategies. The proposed book will discuss literary citizenship, but encourage writers to go beyond the “softer side” of community building and offer principles of successful entrepreneurship for writers.

The Freelancer’s Bible: Everything You Need to Know to Have the Career of Your Dreams On Your Terms (Workman Publishing, 2012), by Sara Horowitz. \$17.95 paperback, 496 pages. ISBN 978-0761164883. One of the best beginner guides if a college graduate intends to pursue a full-time freelance career—whether in writing, design, or something else. Horowitz is a MacArthur Genius Fellow and founder of the national Freelancers Union. My proposed book

is more strategic and industry-focused, while this guide gets into very practical details, covering info on taxes, setting up a home-office, insurance, etc.

Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World (Thomas Nelson, 2012) by Michael Hyatt. \$24.99 hardcover, 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1595555038. Hyatt's best-selling guide focuses on the self-promotion and platform building required for a writer to build a successful career. While the advice is quality, the assumption is that the writer will be primarily focused on online writing and online platform—through social media and blogging.

Publishing 101 (MBA for Writers, 2014) by Jane Friedman. \$14.99 paperback, 233 pages. ISBN: 978-0986312618. My self-published guide focuses on helping first-time book authors understand the publishing industry, pitch their book, and build a platform over the duration of their careers. I estimate about 10-20% of the content overlaps with the proposed book, primarily in the area of online platform building.

About the Author

Jane Friedman is the former publisher of *Writer's Digest*, the No. 1 resource of writing reference and education for writers. She's spent more than 15 years advising and educating authors, and has been blogging about the publishing industry since 2008. Her current website and blog at JaneFriedman.com receives more than 120,000 visits per month, and has won multiple awards for being a top site for writers. She's a columnist for *Publishers Weekly*, and this fall, her 24-lecture series on writing for publication will be released by The Great Courses.

Friedman has been teaching at the university level since the mid-2000s, and currently teaches digital media and publishing at the University of Virginia. Prior to that, she was an assistant professor of e-media at the University of Cincinnati. From 2012–2014, she served as an editor at the National Magazine Award–winning *Virginia Quarterly Review*, where she spearheaded digital initiatives and increased the online presence of the publication.

In addition to her teaching and publishing positions, Friedman has keynoted a range of writing conferences, including The Muse & The Marketplace, PubSmart, the University of Wisconsin Writers' Institute, the Arkansas Writers Conference, the Editors & Agents Conference, and others. Since 2001, she's spoken at more than 300 events, ranging from industry events such as BookExpo America and Frankfurt Book Fair, to MFA programs and regional writers groups. She's also served as a grant panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Creative Work Fund, and consulted for a range of authors, small presses and digital publishing startups.

She is the author of the *Beginning Writer's Answer Book* (Writer's Digest, 2006), as well as *Publishing 101*, her self-published guide for first-time authors. Her essays have been included or are forthcoming in anthologies from Seal Press, University of Chicago Press, McPherson & Co., and Milkweed.

Friedman is a contributing editor to *Writer's Digest* magazine and writes regular feature articles on the business side of the writing life, such as how to transition to a freelance career, how to build a strategic author website, and how the literary agent business is changing. Her work appears online at a range of venues, including *Scratch* magazine, the AWP Chronicle, Digital Book World, Publishing Perspectives, Writer Unboxed, and other sites.

Marketing and Promotion

To promote the book, I would focus on three areas:

1. Increasing the number of my speaking engagements and online events
2. Increasing my activity through my website and social media presence
3. Writing for other sites and publications central to the writing community

1. Speaking engagements and online events

Every year, without solicitation, I receive 10-15 invitations to speak at writing conferences and industry events. Since the beginning of 2015, I've already spoken at 13 events reaching thousands of people, including AWP, Digital Book World, International Digital Publishing Forum, The Writer's Center Publish Now Conference, Pennwriters Annual Conference, Virginia Festival of the Book, the Aspen Writers Group, Indie Recon 2015, and the Houston Writers Guild.

To market my book, I will continue to accept speaking engagements and more actively pursue new conferences. I will also plan a speaking tour targeted to the more than 800 creative writing programs in the United States during the first year of the book's release.

As an active online teacher, I will develop and offer a unique online course to complement the book that teaches writers how to develop a business model for their career that's uniquely tailored to their work, their strengths, and their long-term goals.

I will also develop a series of free webinars and discussions to promote the book, both independently and in collaboration with others in the writing community. (I'm already a regularly featured guest in online discussions with a diverse set of organizations/websites.)

2. Author website and social media presence

My current site and blog receives more than 120,000 visits every month; I will feature the new book on every page for pre-order or purchase.

In the 3 months leading up to my book's release, and for the 6 months following, I will develop a content strategy to build more traffic to support visibility for the book. To complement the new content on my blog, I would also develop strategies to target people who follow me through social media:

- More than 210,000 Twitter followers (verified user)
- 5,000+ Facebook followers & friends
- 5,000+ friends on Goodreads
- 2,300+ followers on Instagram
- 1,700+ followers on Pinterest
- 850+ followers on Tumblr

I also reach more than 10,000 writers directly via e-mail newsletter. I will send a special announcement when the book releases to the entire list, plus include a prominent promotion for the book with every send during the first three months of release.

3. Writing for other sites and publications

I'm a regular contributor to *Publishers Weekly*, *Writer Unboxed* (200,000+ visits/month) and *Writer's Digest* magazine, which will give me the opportunity to mention and promote the book.

I will pitch other sites for guest posts or interviews where I personally know the editor, author, or blogger and can ensure exposure, such as:

- The Write Life (thewritelife.com), Alexis Grant
- My Name Is Not Bob (robertleebrewer.blogspot.com), Robert Brewer
- The Creative Penn (thecreativepenn.com), Joanna Penn

- Elizabeth Spann Craig (elizabethspanncraig.com)
- Debbie Ohi (inkygirl.com)
- Hope Clark (fundsforwriters.com)
- Linda Formichelli (therenegadewriter.com)
- KM Weiland (helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com)
- Frances Caballo (socialmediajustforwriters.com)
- Joel Friedlander (thebookdesigner.com)
- Goins, Writer (goinswriter.com), Jeff Goins

Reviews

The book should be reviewed and/or featured by writer-focused publications such as *Poets & Writers*, *The Writer*, and *The Chronicle* (AWP), if they're not already running an excerpt or if I'm not already contributing a piece on the topic.

Blurbs

People who might be willing to contribute or commit to a blurb in advance: Cathy Day, Lori May, Margaret McMullan, Ian Morris, Amy Stolls, Jeffrey Lependorf, Stewart Moss, Donald Maass, Peter Ginna, Dinty W. Moore, Hallie Ephron, Richard Nash.

Chapter Outline

The manuscript is anticipated to be approximately 100,000 words when complete and can be delivered within one year of signing.

Introduction

Discusses who the book is for, what it can help writers accomplish, and what it *can't* help writers do. Explains the structure of the book and how to tackle the content depending on the reader's goals or current position. Either in the introduction or elsewhere (such as my website), I'll also offer information for professors who want to use the book in the classroom, and recommend approaches for incorporating business topics into either undergraduate or graduate courses.

Part One: The Industry [30,000 words]

Each chapter in Part One offers an overview of how the industry works, so a writer will understand how business decisions get made and how writers fit into the equation. Also included: sidebar information on what it takes to secure (and be happy in) a full-time job within these industries.

Chapter 1: The Book Publishing Industry

An overview of the traditional book publishing landscape and how the business works. Includes insights on the financial standards (P&L statements and profit margins), what role agents play, and definitions of the most important genres/categories of the industry. Also covers how the self-publishing industry operates, with information on most important distributors, retailers, and criteria for success.

Chapter 2: Print Magazines and Literary Journals

An overview of the traditional magazine publishing landscape and how the business works. Includes insights on newsstand and subscription economics, the role of advertising, and how the commercial side of the business has declined since 2007. Also separately covers literary journal publishing and other (usually) nonprofit ventures, especially what it takes to start and sustain one. Will speak to the wildly varying pay, unpredictability, high rejection rates, and effort and time it takes to pitch and send work out—as well as the low visibility and market penetration of some print-only publications. The biggest pro: agents, editors, and other influencers read literary journals and help emerging writers enter the fold.

Chapter 3: Digital Media and Publishing

An overview of online media and how the business works (e.g., everything from Huffington Post to BuzzFeed), with discussion of both websites and apps. Discusses how traditional print publications have expanded online, what challenges they face, and how various online business models play out (hard paywalls, leaky paywalls, membership and subscription, display advertising, native advertising, and more).

Part Two: Writing for Money [25,000 words]

Each chapter will discuss skills needed, the range of pay involved, how to break in, and what expectations a new writer should have.

Chapter 4: Online writing

Covers the phenomenon of working for “exposure,” how free online work can translate into paying work, the role and strategy of digital-only publication in a writer’s career.

Chapter 5: Literary journalism or reportage

How some creative writers stumble into journalism as a career path. Discusses where the opportunities lie and how to build the right skills to be credible and confident.

Chapter 6: Copywriting / marketing / social media

The greatest number of jobs for writers lie on the marketing end of the spectrum—acting as a social media or community writer/editor, online copywriter, or even traditional marketer.

Chapter 7: Writing for the screen

The growing hip factor of LA and writing for TV; the impossibility of selling movie scripts.

Chapter 8: Short-form creative writing

If, when, and how it's possible to make poetry, short stories, and personal essays pay.

Chapter 9: Book-length creative writing

The anatomy of a book deal, standard advances/royalties, how much (or how little) books sell

Part Three: Growing Your Writing Career [15,000 words]

Chapter 10: The Question of the MFA and Other Graduate Degrees

Is an MFA worthwhile? Or any advanced degree in writing and publishing? This chapter will address who can benefit from an advanced degree and how they can lead to paying work or a career advantage. In most cases, their use is limited to improving a writer's craft, and should only be pursued with that in mind. Lower-cost alternatives to MFA programs will be touched on.

Chapter 11: Engaging with the Larger Community

How and when to opportunities outside of degree programs to advance your career and network with others in the literary community, especially writing conferences, writing residencies and fellowships, and literary prizes. Includes a brief discussion and introduction to literary citizenship.

Chapter 12: The Art of Career Building

The softer side of career building: how to build a persona (or the dreaded “brand”), how to self-promote without appearing to do so, how to handle being an introvert, becoming a better networker, and learning how to pitch yourself well.

Chapter 13: Making a Life as a Writer

The emotional resources required to be professionally engaged in writing; what it takes to hustle, and what it takes if you’re a parent, partner, or family member with responsibilities that can overshadow your writing—plus strategies for all the various kinds of failure.

Part Four: Writer As Entrepreneur [15,000 words]

Chapter 14: Online Presence and Business Basics

An introduction to the business fundamentals that every writer needs to acquire and develop: a website, excellent email communication skills and etiquette, and a short and long bio. Also: How to research, understand, and identify your target audience or readership online; what it means to blog or use social media strategically and effectively; and the increasingly visual medium of the web (knowing how to manipulate images and video to your advantage).

Chapter 15: Advanced Marketing Strategies

How to build a content strategy for your career or publication and the power of content marketing; the role of the “funnel” in building an audience, how to use analytics and SEO to increase the effectiveness of your content and find more readers.

Chapter 16: Book and Product Launches

What it takes to launch something successful, whether a book or something else. Covers: book launch timelines, guest posts and blog tours, giveaways (print and digital), blurbs and advance praise, reviews, events (bookstore and non-bookstore), speaking and conferences, and hiring publicity/PR help.

Part Five: Business Models for Writers [15,000 words]

The nitty-gritty of what it means to have a writing career and/or balance it with a day job.

Covers the following models, which are often mixed-and-matched.

- Traditional Publishing
- Self-Publishing and Digital Publishing
- Traditional Freelancing
- Memberships, Patrons, and Donations
- Paywalls
- Teaching and Online Education
- Crowdfunding
- Advertising and Affiliate Income
- Merchandise
- Editing, Services and Consulting

Appendix / Resources

- **Contracts 101:** Understanding contract language (books, magazines, online, and more)
- **Primer on legal issues:** copyright, trademark, permissions, libel (across all mediums)
- **Resources:** recommendation of specific guides to learn more on niche topics

Chapter 1: The Book Publishing Industry [partial chapter]

The first thing you need to know is that book publishing is a business, just like any other. Publishers, editors, and agents look for authors or projects that will make money and provide a good return on investment. While some people like to think there was a golden era of publishing where selecting and producing the best literature took priority—when art was more important than commerce—today’s book publishing industry has its roots in Gutenberg-era printers, which were a distinctly commercial trade from the beginning.

In these early days of the industry, the printer served as the publisher as well, and as such, owned all rights to the work it distributed and sold. Publishers then were under no obligation to pay the author—and authors themselves considered it loathsome to write for money.

One might argue that publishers, since the invention of printing, have remained single-minded in their profit motive. It’s the authors whose business models and attitudes have changed over time. Early in the history of authorship, you had to be of high birth or have patrons to support your writing. It wasn’t until the eighteenth century, with the rise of literacy, that authorship became closely tied to the commercial success of a book. There is even a specific point in time that historians have pinpointed, called the Magna Carta of the modern author, when in 1755 Samuel Johnson abandoned one of his patrons and committed to living off proceeds from his book sales.

Still, since the days of Gutenberg, authors have been complaining about the money-grubbing tendencies of book publishers and booksellers, who were typically one and the same until the nineteenth century. The poet Horace warned other writers of the *Sosii*, the men who published his work and were less than honest in their business dealings. Yet he also

acknowledged that without their efforts, his work would never have become so well-known throughout the Roman Empire.

In publishers' defense, historically authors have always had unreasonable expectations about what their publisher can achieve. When authors' complaints reached a critical mass in the late nineteenth century, publisher G.H. Putnam wrote a landmark guide called *Authors and Publishers* to help improve the PR surrounding publishing companies, as well as outline new operating standards. In 1897, he wrote, "When literary workers complain, it's because they don't understand the business of making and selling books, nor their actual rights and obligations." Book publishing has always been a competitive industry, and most estimates put the rejection rate at 99 percent, even 99.9 percent! You need to have the right expectations going in, so that when you ARE inevitably rejected, it doesn't come as a surprise, and you know what steps to take afterward.

The strange thing about the publishing industry is that while the rejection rate is high, and publishers are fairly risk averse, the truth is there's not a whole lot of money to be made in publishing, for either the author or the publisher. If a full-time living is your goal, it's best to do something else—ANYTHING ELSE—to earn your money. John Steinbeck famously said, "The profession of book writing makes horse racing seem like a solid, stable business." As selective as publishers are, they tend to have a "let's throw it at the wall and see what sticks" approach. They don't market everything that they publish, and they have minuscule marketing budgets compared to other consumer products. The lucky few who get a publishing deal often realize, after the fact, their book is just one among thousands of titles released every year, and not many people even know their book exists.

You should also know upfront that when working with a traditional New York publisher you have to give up a lot of power and control. The publisher gets to decide the cover, the title, the design, the format, the price, and more. You'll have to go through rounds of revisions and

change things you don't want to change. But you must approach the process like a professional, not a high-maintenance *artiste*.

The good news is that the publishing industry doesn't operate based on who you know. You can get agents and editors to consider your work even if they've never heard of you. You can become a successfully published author by following a traditional submissions process. So let's discuss the big picture of how the industry operates.

When most people think about book publishing, what they're really envisioning are what's known as the Big Five. The Big Five are New York-based publishers that produce more than two-thirds of all books in the United States.

The biggest of these is Penguin Random House, which has more than 200 distinct imprints that it publishes under worldwide. It releases more than 15,000 new titles every year or 25 percent of the world's English language books. It is easily twice the size of the other four players.

The next largest publisher is HarperCollins, with more than 65 imprints. One of its best-known divisions is Harlequin, which they acquired in 2014.

Simon & Schuster publishes about 2,000 titles per year under 35 different imprints.

Hachette Book Group, a subsidiary of the French publisher Hachette Livre, releases about 1,000 books per year.

And finally there's Macmillan, which is the parent company of well-known imprints such as Farrar, Straus and Giroux and St. Martin's Press.

The Big Five are all owned by media conglomerates. For example, HarperCollins is owned by News Corporation and Simon & Schuster is owned by CBS.

Publishing wasn't always consolidated into the hands of a few media companies, but in the 1980s and 1990s, consolidation began and it hasn't ever really stopped. Eventually, the Big Five are expected to become the Big Four, and perhaps they will even shrink to the Big Three.

We might ask whether all this consolidation has been good for authors. Unfortunately, it does reduce competition, since imprints within the same house won't bid against each other for books. Therefore the number of publishing options for writers is reduced. However, big publishing companies are better positioned to compete against Amazon, which is considered one of the biggest threats to the business (more on that later).

Perhaps the most important strength of any Big Five publisher is its distribution and reach into the physical retail market. This is nearly impossible for any single author to accomplish, but if you publish with a Big Five house, it's a near-guarantee that your book will sit on store shelves across the nation, including Barnes & Noble, independent bookstores, and a range of specialty retail outlets.

Publishers employ a sales force that focuses on getting retail placement with the biggest possible buy. The challenge for most authors who seek publication is being able to bring a project to the table that really merits this nationwide physical retail distribution. Most publishers need to anticipate sales in the thousands of copies to make it worth their time and investment.

In part due to consolidation, the Big Five have been accused of producing homogenous and sometimes even mediocre work. Whether that accusation is fair or not, they are reliably interested in work that demonstrates commercial potential from the outset. The bright side is that their focus on mass-market, commercial work provides an opening for quality mid-size and small publishers to operate in more niche or specialized markets that have been abandoned or neglected by the Big Five.

While Big Five book titles fill probably 75% of every physical bookstore you walk into, and have significant distribution power, smaller and more independent presses can and do compete, particularly when they have strong and recognizable brands. For instance, Graywolf

Press is well-known in literary publishing circles for producing some of the highest quality poetry and fiction, and some of their books have hit the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Outside of the Big Five, it's nearly impossible to make generalizations about publishers. The Big Five encompass what's known as "trade" publishing. Trade publishing is defined as publishing for a general audience, or publishing books that would get stocked in your average bookstore. It's often said that publishing is really a dozen different businesses because there can be dramatic differences among publishers. They all have different concerns and trends affecting them. New York trade publishing is quite different from K-12 educational publishing, which is quite different from university scholarly publishing. Even within trade publishing itself, there are very different considerations depending the type of book being published. Romance imprints often publish in high volume at low prices since there's significant market demand, while illustrated book publishers produce fewer books at higher prices.

Industry estimates put the number of publishing companies in the tens of thousands, but of course many of these companies don't issue books you'd ordinarily find in a bookstore. Furthermore, with the relative ease of digital publishing, small presses have proliferated. To the average author or consumer, it can be very hard to tell what kind of sales and marketing muscle a small press has. But probably the biggest indicator is how well distributed the publisher is and if they actually invest in a print run of books to fulfill orders placed by retailers. Many of the new small presses have very little trade publishing experience, avoid investing in print runs, and focus on publishing e-books that primarily get distributed and sold on Amazon.

That brings us to one of the most critical transformations of today's publishing landscape that's still playing out. It's possible today for an author or a very small press to publish books that are on an even footing with the Big Five because they have equal access to distribution at Amazon, the number one retailer of books. It's estimated that more than 60% of books in the United States are now sold through Amazon across all formats—print, digital, and audio. If you

look strictly at digital sales, Amazon is believed to account for 70 to 80 percent of all US book sales.

Amazon's power is significant. Appearing on an Amazon bestseller list or being in any way promoted by Amazon can lead to a tremendous sales boost that can't happen in quite the same way through physical distribution or bookstore placement. Amazon is one of the top 10 visited websites in the world, and has about 170 million visitors every month. It's said that 1 out of every 5 Internet visits involves an Amazon-owned website. Publishers' marketing and sales strength pales in comparison; most of them have very little consumer data, while Amazon has data on millions of book buyers.

So it's hard to overstate Amazon's effect on the book business, at every level, including sales, marketing, and distribution, not to mention its role in the shift to digital book consumption. The launch of the Kindle in 2007 changed the face of book retailing forever, not only changing how books get sold and at what price, but also opening up the field to self-published authors to get their work to market easily and profitably.

While the number of published titles was increasing through the 1990s and aughts, the title count skyrocketed after the e-book became a viable consumer format. From traditional publishers, the number of titles produced in 2001 was around 135,000. By 2013, that number was just over 300,000. Compare those numbers to what happened in the self-publishing market. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of titles tripled, with nearly a quarter million titles produced in 2011 alone. By 2013, that number had risen to nearly half a million.

What's truly incredible is that these numbers don't even begin to account for all of the self-publishing activity out there. These numbers only count books that have ISBNs, or International Standard Book Numbers, which are used for counting and identifying books. Many self-publishers choose to publish e-books through Amazon and other outlets without an ISBN.

While more books are being published than ever, the bad news is that book sales have more or less remained flat, with some slight gains depending on which sector you look at. This modest growth and stability has only been possible through the addition of e-book sales. According to Nielsen data, the US print book market peaked around 2008 to 2009; print book sales have been on a slow decline ever since.

So what does this mean for writers today, especially those seeking publication for the first time?

Until the late 1990s, only one viable option existed for 99 percent of authors seeking publication: to gain acceptance from a traditional publisher. While it's popular to say that authors have been self-publishing since the time of Walt Whitman (if not earlier), the chances of gaining credibility and respect without a publisher's stamp of approval were slim to none until books started going digital. "Vanity publishing" has been the frequent and derogatory term for just about any self-publishing effort, a term that's still in use today. But using that term now reveals old-school thinking.

As author Clay Shirky has said, it is no great or important thing to "publish" something in the digital era. You can publish at the click of a button. The difficult work lies in getting attention in what he calls a world of "cognitive surplus." Cognitive surplus refers to societal phenomenon where people now have free time to pursue all sorts of creative and collaborative activities, including writing. Ariana Huffington has said, "Self-expression is the new form of entertainment." A writer today is competing against thousands more would-be writers than even a couple decades ago. More and more, respect tends to go to those who earn the attention of readers, not those who pass muster with the gatekeepers of Big Five publishing.

As a result of this transformation, publishers have had to focus on PR and more actively defend their value to authors, an inconceivable idea just a few years ago. There's a very public and visible class of successful self-published authors who aggressively speak out against so-

called “legacy publishers.” They like to portray the Big Five as slow-moving, low-paying, and generally working against authors’ interests.

But all of this is actually a very old story line, only for a new age: the love/hate relationship between author and publisher. It doesn’t matter where you look, within the entire history of publishing. You will always find a mixture of loyalty and vitriol, of partnership and violent disagreement.

But something else has always remained consistent, too. Major publishers can still bank on the ego boost and recognition that most new, unproven authors continue to need and crave. Even if thousands of authors decided to leave traditional publishing tomorrow, it’s clear there would be more than enough people to take their place in the system and accept a book deal. Most writers also recognize the need for some type of guidance and expertise from industry professionals.

What’s happening today in the publishing industry is confusing to authors as well as hugely divisive. For many decades now, authors have felt underserved and unsupported by their publishers, so the freedom and power offered by self-publishing is very real and potent. Authors have been separating into camps: those who defend traditional publishing and those who defend self-publishing. These arguments have even sometimes spilled into the public eye, as they did in the summer of 2014, during the very open dispute between Amazon and Big Five publisher Hachette. Authors came down on either side of the debate, some defending the publisher, others defending Amazon.

When you see such divergent voices and opinions, it’s not surprising that most authors struggle to understand their choices. Too many authors become paralyzed by the change and are worried they’ll make the wrong choice and damage their careers. The reality is that there’s no single publishing path that’s right for everyone. It depends on your goals as well as your personality as a writer. Even if you do misstep, there’s no mistake that you can’t recover from.

Plus it's much better to approach your work as an author in the industry as a long journey, rather than dependent on the success of any single manuscript or project.

I've already mentioned that the simple act of publishing—the technical aspect—is not a difficult thing in today's market. There are more than 32 million books in print. It's estimated that 50,000 new e-books get released for Kindle every month. What overwhelms every author of every stripe is how to get their book visible and discoverable in the market, then create sustained and meaningful word of mouth about it. With or without a publisher, how does an author build a network to assist in the varied marketing and promotion effort it takes to equal one sale? Given the pace of change, how does an author keep current with the digital and technical advancements that affect how a book gets on the radar of interested readers?

These are among the most significant challenges for a new or unpublished author entering today's market. You should be careful when you encounter publishing advice from authors who are already very well-established in the market, particularly those who got their start before the current digital transformation. Their brands and their readership developed during a different era. Anyone starting a career now has a different set of considerations in play. You can't push the same buttons that were pushed in 2007 and expect the same level of sales or success that were achieved then.

And perhaps most importantly, almost no writer can expect to “just write” and have a sustainable career. You'll be far more attractive to a publisher if they believe you'll be an active marketer and promoter of your book, and for some genres or categories, they need to see hard evidence you can reach a readership who will buy your book.

It's time to destroy the myth that there was ever an author who didn't have to market, promote, or innovate in order to have a writing career. Erasmus organized a network of agents across Europe to actively distribute his works and collect his rewards. Mark Twain sold his work by subscription, which meant that traveling salesmen went door to door. At the time, this form

of marketing was considered extremely impolite, but Twain was more interested in making a living. And of course everyone is well aware of Charles Dickens, who released his work in multiple formats, modified his stories based on audience feedback, and masterfully used the serial to garner attention and publicity.

If you're committed to pursuing a full-time career as a book author, then you'll be faced with the challenge of staying competitive, current, and discoverable in a shifting digital landscape; of having the right tools to be effective and in touch with your readers; and of developing strong partnerships to help you better market and promote. Assisting with all of these challenges is well within a publisher's ability; only they haven't traditionally put many resources into providing such assistance. They've been focused on their own corporate problems of shifting to a digitally enabled business, and squeezing as many sales as possible out of their mastery of print book sales and distribution.

If you find the right publisher, they will be an active, long-term partner and resource. They will help you produce better work, and they will ensure more sales over the long term. Sometimes the agent fulfills this role alongside or instead of the publisher.

But the most important thing for a new author to remember is that you're entering a business. If you want to realize monetary gain or reward, you'll have to be willing to treat your art as a business. Art and business don't have to be antithetical to one another. This is the persistent and dangerous myth of the starving artist: that "real art" doesn't earn money. In fact, art and business can each inform the other, and successful writers throughout history have proven themselves savvy at making their art pay. While I recommended earlier that you pursue *anything else* other than writing to make a living, it's not because good writing is at odds with commercial success. It's that most people aren't willing to make the compromises required or put in the time required to make writing pay. They're looking for what's easy. But writing for publication isn't.

Still, committed writers succeed in the industry every single day, especially those who can adopt a long-term view and recognize that most careers aren't launched with a single fabulous manuscript, but through a series of small successes. You're now taking the one of the best steps of all, a step that will distinguish you from thousands of others. You're learning exactly how this industry operate, as well as your own strategy for standing out and getting published.