

Before You Pay A Publisher

17 Questions Every Author Should Ask
Before Signing a Contract or Paying
for Publishing Services



The Rural Publishing Company

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Introduction

You've written a book.

You've found someone who can help you publish it.

They've sent you a proposal.

There's a publishing package.

And there's a price at the bottom.

Before you sign anything or hand over your money:

Ask some questions.

There are many excellent professionals and publishing service providers helping independent authors produce high-quality books.

There are also companies charging authors thousands – sometimes tens of thousands – of dollars for services the author doesn't fully understand.

The problem isn't necessarily paying someone to help publish your book.

Professional editing, proofreading, design and publishing support cost money.

The important question is:

What exactly are you paying for?

A good publishing provider should be able to answer that clearly.

Here are 17 questions worth asking before you say yes.

(Plus, a few more handy bonus notes!)

What Type of Publishing Agreement Is This?

This should be the first question.

Are you being offered:

- a traditional publishing contract?
- supported or assisted self-publishing?
- hybrid publishing?
- a publishing services package?
- something else?

Don't get too distracted by the label.

Ask how the arrangement actually works.

In a conventional traditional publishing arrangement, the publisher generally funds the production and publication of the book and earns its return through book sales.

With supported or assisted self-publishing, the author generally pays for professional services required to produce and publish the book.

Neither arrangement is automatically good or bad.

But they're very different.

Ask:

'Can you explain exactly what type of publishing arrangement this is and what my responsibilities will be?'

Exactly What Is Provided In The Price?

Never rely solely on a package name such as:

Premium Publishing Package – \$6,995

Ask what's actually inside it.

Does the price include:

- ☐ Manuscript assessment
- ☐ Structural/developmental editing
- ☐ Line/copy editing
- ☐ Proofreading
- ☐ Cover design
- ☐ Internal design/typesetting

- ☐ ISBNs
- ☐ Barcode
- ☐ eBook production
- ☐ Print setup
- ☐ Print-on-demand setup
- ☐ Distribution
- ☐ Retailer listings
- ☐ Proof copies
- ☐ Author copies
- ☐ Marketing
- ☐ Publicity
- ☐ Author website
- ☐ Launch support

Then ask:

What isn't included?

Sometimes that's the more useful question.

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What Type Of Editing Is Included?

‘Professional editing included’ sounds reassuring.

But what does it mean?

There is a significant difference between:

- manuscript assessment
- developmental/structural editing
- line editing
- copy editing
- proofreading.

Ask exactly what level of editing your manuscript will

receive.

Also ask:

- How many editing rounds are included?
- Who performs the editing?
- Will I see tracked changes?
- Can I discuss the edits with my editor?
- What happens after I make revisions?

If proofreading is included, establish whether this is a **separate final stage** or simply another name being used for editing.

Ask:

‘What specific editing and proofreading stages will my manuscript go through?’

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Who Will Actually Work On My Book?

You may be talking to a wonderful salesperson.

That doesn't necessarily mean they're the person editing, designing or producing your book.

Ask who will actually perform the work.

Are they:

- in-house staff?
- Australian freelancers?
- overseas contractors?
- specialist book editors?

- professional book designers?
- general graphic designers?

There's nothing inherently wrong with outsourcing.

But you have every right to understand **who you're paying to work on your manuscript.**

Ask:

'Who will edit and design my book, and what publishing experience do they have?'

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Can I see Books You've Previously Published or Produced?

This one is simple.

Look at the books.

Don't rely entirely on testimonials.

Find actual titles the company has produced.

Look at:

- covers
- typography

- internal design
- retailer listings
- reviews
- overall professionalism.

If possible, look at books similar to yours.

A company producing beautiful business books may not necessarily be the right fit for your epic fantasy novel.

Likewise, someone specialising in novels may have little experience managing a heavily illustrated children's book.

Ask:

‘Can you show me examples of books similar to mine that you’ve produced?’

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Who Owns The Copyright?

This is a big one.

In Australia, copyright in an original manuscript generally arises automatically, but publishing contracts can grant significant rights to other parties.

Don't simply assume that because you wrote the book, every possible right remains unaffected by the agreement you're signing.

Read the contract carefully.

Ask:

'Will I retain copyright in my work, and what rights am I granting you under this agreement?'

If the answer is difficult to understand, ask for clarification.

And if you're signing a significant publishing contract and aren't confident about the terms, consider obtaining independent legal advice.

Who Owns The Publishing Rights?

Copyright and publishing rights aren't necessarily the same question.

Your agreement may give a publisher certain rights to publish, distribute or exploit your work.

Find out:

- what rights you're granting
- whether they're exclusive
- which formats they cover
- which territories they cover
- how long the rights last

- how you can get those rights back.

Ask:

‘What publishing rights am I granting you, for how long, and how can those rights return to me?’

You don’t want to discover years later that you can’t easily move your book elsewhere.

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Who Owns The ISBN?

An ISBN identifies a specific edition of your book and contains information about its publisher.

Depending on the publishing arrangement, the ISBN may be supplied by the publisher or obtained by the author.

Neither is automatically wrong.

But you should know which applies to you.

Ask:

‘Whose name will be registered as the publisher associated with my ISBN?’

Who Owns The Final Files?

You've paid for:

- editing
- cover design
- typesetting
- eBook production.

What happens to those files?

Can you have them?

Ask whether you'll receive copies of relevant final files, such as:

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- print-ready cover PDF
- print-ready internal PDF
- eBook file
- artwork or design files where applicable.

Also clarify what rights you have to use those files elsewhere.

Ask:

‘What final files will I receive, and can I use them if I later move to another publishing provider?’

Where Will My Book Be Actually Available?

‘Worldwide distribution’ sounds fantastic.

But ask what it actually means.

Will your book be:

- available through Amazon?
- listed through major online retailers?
- available for Australian bookstores to order?
- available through international distribution networks?

- available to libraries?
- physically stocked in bookstores?

That last one is important.

Available to bookstores and stocked by bookstores are not the same thing.

A distributor may make your book available for retailers to order without any retailer choosing to put copies on its shelves.

Ask:

‘Which distribution channels will my book use, and does this mean retailers can order it or that they will actually stock it?’

How Will My Book Be Printed?

Ask whether your book will use:

- print-on-demand
- short-run digital printing
- offset printing
- a combination.

If the company requires you to purchase hundreds or thousands of books upfront, understand why.

Large print runs can reduce the cost per copy.

They also leave you with a lot of books to sell.

Ask:

***‘Do I have to purchase a minimum quantity of books,
and what will my author copies cost?’***

Also ask about freight.

A fantastic per-copy printing price becomes less fantastic when several hundred books need to be shipped across Australia.

How Is The Retail Price Determined?

Your book's retail price effects:

- reader demand
- retailer margins
- printing economics
- your earnings.

Ask who sets it.

If the publisher sets the price, do you have input?

If you're expected to set it yourself, will they help you calculate a realistic figure?

Ask:

‘Who determines the retail price, and can you show me how the printing and distribution costs affect it?’

Your book needs to be competitively priced while still making financial sense.

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How Much Will I Earn Per Sale?

Don't settle for:

'You'll receive 100% royalties!'

One hundred per cent of *what?*

There may still be:

- printing costs
- retailer discounts
- wholesale discounts
- platform fees
- distribution fees

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- commissions
- shipping costs.

Ask for a real example.

Ask:

‘If my paperback retails for \$29.95, approximately how much would I receive from a typical sale through your main distribution channels?’

That’s a much more useful number than a royalty percentage on its own.

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Are There Any Ongoing Fees?

You understand the initial publishing cost.

Now ask what happens in Year 2.

And Year 3.

Possible ongoing costs might include:

- annual publishing fees
- distribution fees
- title maintenance fees
- website hosting
- storage fees

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- account management fees
- marketing subscriptions.

Also ask about future changes.

What happens if you discover a typo six months after publication?

Ask:

‘Are there any ongoing, annual or future fees I should know about?’

Get the answer in writing.

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What Specific Marketing Is Actually Included?

‘Marketing included’ can mean almost anything.

It might mean:

- a social media graphic.

Or it could mean:

- a comprehensive launch strategy
- media materials
- media outreach
- advertising

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- bookstore outreach
- author website
- social content
- launch planning.

Ask for specifics.

And be cautious of anyone promising guaranteed bestseller status, guaranteed media coverage or unrealistic sales numbers.

Nobody can guarantee how many copies readers will buy.

Ask:

‘What specific marketing activities are included, who will carry them out and for how long?’

What Happens If I Want To Leave?

This is one of the most important questions – and one authors often forget to ask.

Right now, you're excited.

You've found someone who wants to help publish your book.

You're not thinking about leaving.

But you should still know how.

Ask:

- Can I terminate the agreement?
- How much notice is required?

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- Are there termination fees?
- What happens to my book listings?
- What happens to my files?
- What happens to my ISBN?
- What happens to unpaid royalties?
- Can I republish the book elsewhere?

Ask:

‘If I decide to leave in the future, what exactly happens to my book, files, listings and publishing rights?’

A good business relationship shouldn't rely on making it impossible for you to leave.

What Are You Promising Me – & Is It In The Contract?

Finally, compare the sales conversation with the actual agreement.

You may have been told:

‘We’ll get your book into bookstores.’

‘We’ll market it nationally.’

‘You’ll own everything.’

‘We’ll get media coverage.’

‘We’ll make your book a bestseller.’

Now look at the contract.

Does it actually say that?

If something is important to your decision, don't rely entirely on a verbal conversation.

Ask:

'Can you show me where the services and commitments we've discussed are covered in the agreement?'

And never allow yourself to be rushed into signing.

A reputable provider should give you reasonable time to read and understand what you're agreeing to.

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Your 17-Question Checklist

Before you pay a publishing provider, make sure you can answer:

- ☐ **1. What type of publishing arrangement is this?**
- ☐ **2. Exactly what is included in the price?**
- ☐ **3. What type of editing and proofreading is included?**
- ☐ **4. Who will actually work on my book?**
- ☐ **5. Can I see books they've previously produced?**
- ☐ **6. Who owns the copyright?**
- ☐ **7. What publishing rights am I granting?**

- ☐ **8. Who owns/registers the ISBN?**
- ☐ **9. What final files will I receive?**
- ☐ **10. Where will my book actually be available?**
- ☐ **11. How will my book be printed?**
- ☐ **12. Who determines the retail price?**
- ☐ **13. How much will I actually earn from each sale?**
- ☐ **14. Are there ongoing or future fees?**
- ☐ **15. What specific marketing will actually be done?**
- ☐ **16. What happens if I want to leave?**
- ☐ **17. Are the promises I've been given reflected in the contract?**

Three More Things To Do Before You Sign

1. Google Them

Look beyond the testimonials on the company's own website.

Search the business name.

Search reviews.

Look at their authors.

Look at their books.

See how long they've been operating.

One unhappy review doesn't necessarily mean a company is terrible.

Likewise, a page full of glowing testimonials doesn't automatically mean they're right for you.

Look at the overall picture.

2. Talk To An Author Who Has Used Them

If you're considering making a significant investment, ask whether you can speak to a previous client.

Useful questions include:

Did the final cost match what you expected?

Were you happy with the editing and design?

Did the process match what you were promised?

Was communication good?

Would you use them again?

That last question can be particularly revealing.

3. Read. The. Contract.

(Or Service Agreement)

Yes, it's boring.

Read it anyway.

Pay particular attention to:

- copyright
- publishing rights
- exclusivity
- royalties
- fees
- duration
- termination
- intellectual property
- file ownership
- distribution
- author obligations.

If you don't understand something, ask.

If the answer still doesn't make sense, consider obtaining independent advice before signing.

Never sign a publishing agreement you don't understand.

Red Flags Worth Slowing Down For

Be cautious if you encounter:

- high-pressure sales tactics
- ‘today only’ publishing deals
- guaranteed bestseller claims
- guaranteed book sales
- guaranteed media coverage
- vague explanations of distribution
- reluctance to provide a contract before payment
- unclear ownership of rights

- unclear royalty calculations
- large compulsory book purchases
- unexplained ongoing fees
- difficulty getting straight answers to straightforward questions.

A red flag doesn't always mean you should immediately walk away.

But it does mean:

Ask more questions.

What Are The Green Flags?

Look for a publishing provider that:

- clearly explains its publishing model
- is upfront about costs
- provides detailed inclusions
- gives you a written agreement
- answers questions without pressure
- is realistic about book sales
- can show examples of previous work
- clearly explains rights and royalties

- gives you appropriate input into your book
- communicates throughout the process
- explains distribution honestly
- is transparent about additional costs.

Most importantly:

You should understand what you're paying for.

Publishing is complicated enough without mystery fees and vague promises.

Remember: Paying To Publish Doesn't Automatically Mean 'Vanity Publishing'

Independent authors pay professionals all the time.

They pay:

- editors
- proofreaders
- designers
- illustrators

- formatters
- publicists
- website developers
- printers.

The fact that money changes hands isn't the issue.

The question is whether you're receiving **professional services, genuine value and a publishing arrangement you understand.**

That's why these 17 questions matter.

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Your Publishing Partner Notes

Company/provider I'm considering:

Package/service:

Quoted price:

\$ _____

Additional costs identified:

\$ _____

Ongoing fees:

Publishing model:

Rights I retain:

Rights I grant:

Distribution included:

Marketing included:

What happens if I leave:

Questions I still need answered:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Am I comfortable with what I'm being offered?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I need more information

Trust Your Questions – Not Just The Sales Pitch

Publishing your first book can feel intimidating.

You're entering an industry you may know very little about and making decisions about something you've potentially spent years creating.

You don't need to become a publishing expert overnight.

But you **do** need to ask questions.

A reputable publishing professional shouldn't be annoyed because you want to understand:

- **where your money goes**

- **who owns what**
- **how your book will be published**
- **how you'll be paid**
- **and what happens if things don't work out.**

Those aren't difficult-author questions.

They're sensible business questions.

Your manuscript matters.

Your money matters.

And you deserve to understand what you're agreeing to before you hand over either.

What's Next?

You've now explored:

- **The three main publishing pathways**
- **How long publishing actually takes**
- **What you may need to budget for**
- **Whether your manuscript is ready**
- **What to ask before choosing a publishing provider**

You're no longer starting from scratch.

You have the foundations of a publishing plan.

The final step in your **Regional Author Starter Kit** is to bring everything together:

YOUR 2027 PUBLICATION PLANNER

Turn ‘I’d love to publish a book’ into an actual plan.

Choose your target publication date, work backwards and map out your next steps.

The Regional Author Starter Kit is brought to you by The Rural Publishing Company – helping regional voices shine, one book at a time.

Important

This guide provides general information only and isn’t legal or financial advice. Publishing contracts and individual circumstances vary. If you’re unsure about the legal or financial implications of an agreement, seek appropriate independent professional advice.