

# OPINIONATED GLOSSARY OF PUBLISHING INDUSTRY TERMS

People who work in the publishing industry—which is occasionally called the “legacy” publishing industry, and frequently called the “traditional” publishing industry—often use different terms to describe the same thing. People who work in the self-publishing industry—who have been known to call themselves “indie” publishers—may use the same words as traditional publishers ... to describe altogether different things. All this mix ’n’ match terminology is plenty confusing, with few permanent definitions. That’s why this is an “opinionated” glossary. Definitions provided are those I’ve found to be most commonly used—with plenty of caveats.

This glossary supports complements *How to Write a Book Proposal, Fifth Edition* (Writers Digest Books), in which these terms are discussed at greater length.

## **Acquisitions Editor** (*See Editor*)

## **Advance**

An advance (occasionally called a “guarantee”) is money paid to the writer as an incentive to sign a publishing contract. Advances are called “advances” because initially they meant money “advanced” to cover a writer’s living expenses while he wrote his book. Today, the word “advance” is a misnomer, as advances are usually broken into anywhere from two to five payments, with, in many cases, significant payments made long after publication. In fact, the size of the advance

now has little to do with paying the bills; some advances are so tiny they barely buy dinner and others (can you say “Obama?”) are big enough to sustain a small country’s government. Agents still argue author poverty to obtain bigger advances, but competition for a book from other publishers convinces publishers to loosen purse strings far more readily than an objective analysis of the author’s real needs.

Advances aren’t gifts—they’re owed back to the publishers and are deducted from “royalty” money the publisher owes the author. Writers don’t see a dime from their books until the advance paid to them has been “earned out” or “earned back” by book sales. Fortunately, advances don’t have to be paid back any other way. If the royalties earned don’t equal the advance paid, the publisher absorbs the loss. (*See Royalties.*)

No matter what the size, an advance is an easy way to separate traditional publishers from self-publishing service providers. If the publisher pays you, you’re working with a traditional house. If you pay them, you’re self-publishing. (OK, there are exceptions, but this is a good rule of thumb. *See Hybrid.*)

## Agent

The agent, or “literary agent,” is the business person who represents your work and licenses it to appropriate publishers in various media on your behalf. Agents can be paid on commission (most common), or on a fee or an hourly basis. Commissioned agents have the most incentive to sell your book, because they don’t get paid until you do—a process that can take years.

Agents usually represent all publication rights to your work, including translation rights, film rights, and merchandizing rights. Agents typically license the “primary” rights to your book themselves, and hire “subagents” to license other rights on your behalf. (*See Rights and Subagent.*)

## Subagent

The subagent is hired by the literary agent to help license the rights to your book in markets better known to the subagent than the literary agent. For example, a film subagent usually works in New York or Hollywood, and interfaces with other people in the movie industry daily. It’s very much in the author’s interest to have specialists selling specialized rights, but there is a cost. The commission charged by the subagent is added to the commission charged by the primary literary agent, and deducted from the total payment due to the author. Large

agencies often have subagents on the payroll, or have other types of in-house alliances with subagents.

## **Ancillary Rights** (*See Rights: Subsidiary Rights*)

## **Autobiography** (*See Narrative Nonfiction: Autobiography*)

## **Back Matter**

The parts of a book that appear after the end of the main text. You'll never see the words "back matter" in the table of contents of a book. You will see: Appendix, Bibliography, Endnotes, Index, Glossary, and so forth. A newish development: acknowledgments, which once commonly appeared at the beginning of books (in the "front matter") now, especially when lengthy, are placed at the end, as part of the back matter.

For a sizable number of books published today, long bibliographies and even endnotes are posted online at the author's website, and only referenced in the book itself.

## **Biography** (*See Narrative Nonfiction*)

## **Book Product** (*See Commercial Nonfiction*)

## **Buy and Sell**

When an editor acquires a book from an agent, she usually says "I bought this book." Likewise, agents say "I sold this book to Simon & Schuster;" or "I sold this book in France." This common vernacular isn't exactly accurate. Publication rights are rarely sold outright; they remain the author's property for the term of copyright, after which, long after the author's death, they become public property.

What the editor and agent mean is that rights to license the book for a period of time have been negotiated. (*See License.*)

## **Commercial Nonfiction**

Commercial nonfiction books have demonstrable popular appeal and can be clearly described and sold. Also called: "popular nonfiction," "book product," "platform-driven." Types of books in this category include practical or prescriptive guides, impulse buys, inspirational books, pop culture books, and any book written by an author with a large established audience.

## Commercial Publishing

Sometimes used to define the for-profit publishing industry—places most people associate with the term “book publisher”—as opposed to nonprofits like university presses, and to self-publishers.

## Curation, Selection

What traditional publishers do that distinguishes them from self-publishing service providers.

Service providers will publish anything the author can pay for; they have little to no stake in the performance of the book and make their money on the front end, from providing the publishing service to the writer. Publishers that make their money from book sales have an incentive to select only those books they believe will sell to consumers, either based on quality of the work or demand for the author or topic. Such publishers “curate” or select for such books, choosing to publish some books and choosing not to publish others.

## Earned Out, Earned Back (*See Advance*)

## Editor

Many types of editors work in book publishing.

### *Acquisitions Editor*

An acquisitions editor, sometimes called an “acquiring editor,” but most frequently just called an “editor,” is the person at a book publishing company who is primarily responsible for obtaining books to publish, and for shepherding those books she acquires through the publication process. The acquiring editor may provide editorial guidance and even in-depth editing, but may also farm out your book to a freelancer.

### *Book Doctor*

Book doctors are a cross between ghostwriters and developmental editors.

Book doctors restructure and rewrite your material, usually extensively. The difference between a book doctor and a ghost is that book doctors work from material already written, while ghostwriters usually craft books from scratch, collaborating with the author in various ways.

The book doctor’s work is more intensive than the developmental editor’s. While the developmental editor’s job is to suggest large scale changes, the book doctor actually makes those changes.

Book doctors cost more than developmental editors and less than ghostwriters. (*See Ghostwriter.*)

### ***Developmental Editor; Substantive Editor***

Big picture edits like structural changes within the book and within each chapter are called developmental or substantive edits. Within a publishing company, the acquisitions editor usually does the developmental edit, and, as part of the process, writes an “editorial letter” to authors describing the requested big fixes. The acquisitions editor may do a line edit at the same time as the developmental edit, but if significant changes are requested, she will wait until the author submits his rewrites before line editing the manuscript. Self-publishers can hire developmental editors to provide critiques and suggested restructures.

### ***Line Editor***

The line editor suggests changes at a more granular level, offering ideas for rewrites that will increase reader engagement and understanding, sentence by sentence. The line editor isn’t necessarily looking for grammatical errors, but for clarity of expression. Within the publishing company, line editing is also usually done by the editor who has acquired the manuscript, and can be done at the same time as the developmental edit, or after an author has submitted his next draft.

### ***Copy Editor***

Copy editors are almost always freelancers, and copy editing is usually outsourced by publishers. Copy editors edit for spelling and grammar errors, and sometimes provide fact-checking as well.

### ***Production Editor***

The production editor, usually in-house, prepares the manuscript for production by marking all headings and subheadings, inserting illustrations and clarifying fonts, spacing and other design and production needs.

### ***Proofreader***

Within the publishing house, proofreading is usually done by the production editor. Freelance proofreaders are invaluable for self-publishers, as e-book conversions often introduce errors.

### ***Gatekeeper***

“Gatekeeper” is a label sometimes given to the agents, editor, and publishers who curate the books they choose to represent or publish. Although the term is sometimes used pejoratively by self-publishers, many book buyers prefer to

purchase books that have been professionally vetted, selected, and edited. The alternative to curated publication is crowdsourced or open-sourced publication, where market demand based on writing samples drives popularity. Not to get too into the weeds, but publication based on market demand is far less egalitarian than it seems, as it costs money and time to create consumer awareness. Books published based solely on market demand skews disproportionately to writers unhampered by financial or time constraints, or writers active in specific online category communities such as YA or genre fiction. In other words, it can cost a lot of money to self-publish successfully. (Trade publishers get hit on both sides—self-publishers say they're too strict at the gates, while scholarly publishers say they're too driven by market needs to be strict enough.)

## Genre

Strictly speaking, genre fiction adheres to specific and predictable category-driven writing conventions. A bodice-ripping romance will be epic and historical, with the central plot hinging on the sexually-experienced hero violently introducing a virginal heroine to the pleasures of the body, only to be converted himself to an understanding of true love at the end of the tale. Writing to convention can be instructive, and many writers start within genres to hone their skills, then break free of convention into more complex work with larger audiences. Genres are not created by publishers; they're created by markets when a new concept takes off, others emulate and label it, and publishers and booksellers follow by making space on their lists. New genres pop up all the time, and can be really fun: check out “clockpunk” and “nowpunk.”

The term genre is used, just as frequently, to simply mean any definable category of book in both fiction and nonfiction. So some people call “literary fiction” a genre, when of course literary fiction is often all about breaking conventions, not adhering to them.

## Ghostwriter

Ghostwriters handle the task of writing for the author, but are not credited on the book. They may be mentioned, without explanation, in the acknowledgments section. The use of a ghostwriter is a commonly accepted practice among celebrities, and only becomes problematic when the author claims to have written the book himself. Ghostwriting fiction is a growing phenomenon, especially in the Young Adult category, but in those cases the ghostwriter is usually credited.

## Hook, Handle, Tagline

Mike Larsen and I talk about hooks, handles and taglines at length in *How to Write a Book Proposal, Fifth Edition*. These terms all apply to short catch-phrases employed in query letters, proposals and ad copy that quickly capture the positive attention of agents, publishers and readers.

## House

Publishing company. (*See Publisher.*)

## Hybrid

In a confusing, rapidly changing industry, perhaps no term is used in more—and even contradictory ways—than the term “hybrid.” Hybrid of course means a mix of two different breeds of something into something new that combines elements of each. But is it good for writers? Bad? It depends.

### *Hybrid Publishers*

Hybrid publishers are publishers who expect writers to share the costs of publishing and promoting their books, but who make valid claims to be selective in what books they publish. The best hybrids do not charge upfront, pay larger royalties to make up for the writer’s participation in cost-sharing, and are respected by bookstores. Hybrid publishing is a growing field, with almost as many different types of arrangements as there are publishers. They’re sometimes called “author-assisted publishers,” “independent publishers,” “partnership publishers,” “copublishers,” and “entrepreneurial publishers” (according to the August 11, 2016, *Writer’s Digest* online article “What is Hybrid Publishing? Here Are 4 Things All Writers Should Know”).

### *Hybrid Agent*

When e-books became viable publishing options for out-of-print print titles, some agents began helping their clients self-publish old books. Some further expanded their agent services to include helping clients self-publish manuscripts that had never been published before. Suddenly agents were not just agents; they were a hybrid of agent and publisher.

The hybrid agency service-providing work options don’t end there. Writers often turn to their agents for editorial and marketing services. Some agencies outsource that work, but some dive deeper into hybrid territory by providing those services and charging their clients for them. At the same time, self-publishers routinely approach established agents for publishing expertise. The

role of the agent and how he's paid has shifted, and agents who offer any services other than traditional commissioned representation fall under this "hybrid" umbrella. A hybrid identification isn't bad or good in itself; it depends on the ethics of the agent involved. It can very easily lead to sticky conflicts of interests, though, and the AAR explicitly does not allow members to take fees from clients for such services.

### *Hybrid Author*

Hybrid author is used to describe two types of authors:

1. Many writers use a combination of self-publishing and traditional publishing to get their different books into the hands of readers. For example, a writer might self-publish his first book, then find a traditional publisher for his next book.
2. Some writers self-publish in one format, usually digitally (as an e-book), and obtain a publisher for other formats, such as print books distributed to bookstores. This option is generally available only to the most commercially successful writers.

### *Hybrid Flower*

Much less complicated than hybrids in publishing.

## **Imprint**

A branded line of books within a major publishing house.

## **License (vs. Sell)**

Hang around publishing people for more than two minutes and you'll overhear something like: "I bought this great book yesterday," or "I'm pretty sure I'm going to sell German rights next week." This vernacular is the norm, but it's incorrect. Technically, the only "owner" of publishing rights to a literary property is the copyright holder—usually the writer—and as such, all uses, unless a transfer of copyright is involved, are licenses. The license may be limited to a finite period of time, or may last as long as the book is in print, but if the conversation above were to be completely accurate, the speakers would say: "I acquired the rights to publish the print edition of this book until it goes out of print yesterday," and "I'm pretty sure I'm going to license the right to publish this book in the German language for a period of seven years from the signing of the agreement tomorrow." (*See Rights.*)

**Literary Agent** (*See Agent*)

**Literary Nonfiction** (*See Narrative Nonfiction*)

**Memoir** (*See Narrative Nonfiction: Autobiography and Memoir*)

## **Metadata**

A software term that in publishing vernacular usually refers to underlying, searchable objective information about a book, such as its title, subtitle, price, length, format, publisher, and author.

## **Narrative Nonfiction**

Narrative nonfiction, sometimes called “literary nonfiction,” tells a story about something that happened. It’s full of documented and documentable facts. If conversations aren’t taken verbatim from historical records, we expect a footnote and a head’s up. We trust narrative nonfiction. Classic examples are: *Unbroken* by Lauren Hillenbrand and *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown.

## ***Autobiography and Memoir***

An autobiography is the writer’s full life story, written under the writer’s name. The line between autobiography and memoir can blur, but I think of a memoir as a fact-based literary endeavor to understand the self, and autobiography as historical record. Memoir often covers a particular portion of a writer’s life as opposed to the whole, and is written to express a goal larger than the chronological events in an individual’s life. The bar for fact-checking in autobiography is typically higher than for memoir, as memoirs are expected to be told through the haze of the author’s memory and personal interpretation of events. Voice and literary style (and merit) are hallmarks of memoir; not so in autobiography. However, to maintain the reader’s trust, any factual departure, character consolidation, or fabrication of events must be noted in the front or back matter of a memoir.

## ***Biography***

Someone’s full life story, birth to death, written by somebody else. Expected to be factual and footnoted.

## ***Creative Nonfiction***

Arguably all nonfiction is somewhat fictionalized, as the writer chooses what to include, omit, and emphasize, based on his desires and even prejudices. However,

some writers deliberately layer-in long fictional passages, inventing characters, events, perspectives, and conversations to make a larger thematic point. Where does creative nonfiction cross the line and become historical fiction? The lines aren't clear. I find this problematic. I'm all for experimentation in writing, but to me, any writer who calls her writing "nonfiction" of any kind owes the reader a detailed explanation of what has been invented, and what has been confirmed through scholarship. Facts matter.

Memoir is sometimes classified as creative nonfiction. It is only rightly so classified if a large portion has been fictionalized, and attention to such license is called out in front or back matter, or in footnotes.

## Nonfiction

Nonfiction books are factual.

## Profit & Loss Statement ("P&L")

Most editors who wish to acquire a book must craft a financial document, in which they list, on the profit side, an estimate of how many copies of the book will sell in a given amount of time in each of its editions, the price of each edition, and how much money the publisher can anticipate earning from other sources of income like subsidiary rights. On the loss side, they list the publisher's cost to publish the book, including overhead, fixed and variable costs, and the money paid to the author. P&Ls are fill-in-the-blanks documents. If the bottom line shows a loss to the publisher, the editor can change the estimated cover price or guess at the number of copies sold so that the bottom line shows a profit. The numbers can't be fudged too far, as editors today are often held accountable for how closely a book's performance matched the editor's projected P&L.

## Platform

See *How to Write a Book Proposal, Fifth Edition*, for a detailed description of platform. Essentially, platform in publishing refers to the means a writer has in place to reach her readers. Platform may include a well-trafficked website, a pre-booked national speaking tour, or a popular e-mailed newsletter.

"Promotion" is what the author or publisher does to promote the book, using the platform. If an author has 40,000 Twitter followers, that's a platform. If the publisher offers free books to those twitter followers, that's promotion.

## **Promotion-Driven Nonfiction; Popular Nonfiction** *(See Commercial Nonfiction)*

### **Proposal**

Description, accompanied by sample writing, of a proposed nonfiction book, its audience, and the author's experience and platform. Buy *See How to Write a Book Proposal, Fifth Edition*.

### **Primary Rights** *(See Rights)*

## **Publishing Coach; Publishing Consultant; Book Coach**

Coaches and consultants are people you pay to provide guidance in writing and selling your book. Coaches answer fundamental questions like:

- Should I self publish or try traditional?
- How do I find the right agent?
- Is my book publishable?
- Where do I find a good editor?
- Is my platform strong enough? How do I build it up?

Such questions aren't appropriate for a freelance editor or even an agent; many questions, such as whether to self-publish, come up before writers have agents.. Book coaches can be a real boon for a writer—or a waste of money if the coach isn't experienced. Choose a consultant who has worked at a traditional publishing house, or has published her own books with traditional publishers. Both Jody and Mike offer consulting and coaching services, but they would never stoop to advertising in a glossary. Kidding! Find Mike here: <http://larsenauthorcoaching.com/>.

Find Jody here: <http://authorplanet.org/>.

## **Publishing People, Publishing Industry**

People-editors, publishers, agents, lawyers-who work in the traditional publishing business, as opposed to self-publishers. May include academic presses. Loosely means anyone in the business of publishing curated books. Being a “publishing person” connotes a specific attitude towards, and knowledge of, the book publishing industry, recognizable to other “publishing people.”

## Query or Query Letter

A letter aspiring writers who seek representation send to agents. Query letters, for some agents, have been replaced by online fill-in-the-blanks forms, so writers should always check the agent's website for guidelines. Query letters aren't typically sent to large publishers. Writers submitting directly to small or academic presses, and agents submitting proposals to major publishers send full proposals accompanied by cover letters, and skip the query step.

## Rights

Think of your book not as a book, but as a collection of licensable rights—that's how agents and publishers see it. Your content can be brought to the world in many forms, and you have the right to receive streams of income through every form in which it is published.

Primary rights are those rights licensed to your initial publisher for what most agree is the central form in which your work will be published: the book itself, in book form, in the language in which it's written. For authors living in the US, primary rights are generally licensed to a US publisher. In France, the primary rights would be These rights typically include:

- publishing and selling the book in hardcover, trade and mass market paperback, and digital editions in your country

### *Subsidiary Rights (or Sub Rights or Secondary Rights or Ancillary Rights)*

All the possible ways the content of your book can be published beyond that central form defined as a "primary right" are called "subsidiary rights." They're also commonly called "subrights" and less commonly called "secondary rights" or "ancillary rights." Such rights include:

- performance rights (film, TV, etc.)
- enhanced e-books, apps, digital games
- merchandise, like t-shirts, toys, calendars
- translation into other languages
- publication in the UK
- first serial (publication in magazines before the book comes out)
- audiobooks

There are even more ways your content can be exploited, but as these editions don't typically have significant monetary impact or publishers that specialize in the form,

they're not often discussed and are typically granted to the original publisher of the work, include rights to large-print editions and second serial rights.

Subrights are sometimes granted to the original publisher, and are sometimes retained by the author (often as a part of the author's agent's negotiation strategy). Each subright is considered separately—for example, film rights are typically retained by the author without argument from the original publisher, while foreign rights are fought over. These rights have value—but only if they are granted or held by someone in a position to exploit them (meaning “license” or, in publishing vernacular, “sell”). (*See License.*)

## Royalty/Royalties

In publishing, this refers to the amount of money an author earns, per book. Some publishers pay authors a percentage of the “list price” of a book (the price you see on the cover). Some publishers pay on the basis of “net price” (the amount that is earned by the book after discounts and other costs are deducted). A rare few pay a constant dollar amount per book, no matter the price or the cost.

Each edition of the book typically pays a different royalty amount. So a hard-cover book royalty percentage to the author is different from a paperback, which is different from an e-book, which is different from a special sale edition, which is different from a Canadian edition, which is different from an audiobook.

It's kind of head-spinning, especially as there is wiggle room during the negotiating process for each of these rights. Two things to keep in mind:

1. The royalty payment structure was developed initially to be fair to author and publisher. Royalties were essentially intended to distribute profits half to the publisher and half to the author. (This is why low e-book royalties are so contentious today.)
2. When a publisher pays you an advance, it deducts the amount it has “advanced” you before it pays you royalties.

## Secondary Rights (*See Rights*)

### Self-Publisher

The ways manuscripts become printed (or digitized) books these days are numerous and confusing. For me, if you pay someone to have your book published, you're a self-publisher. If the only person behind the decision to publish or not publish your book is you, you're a self-publisher.

## **Serious and Upmarket Nonfiction** (*See Narrative Nonfiction*)

## **Subsidiary Rights** (*See Rights*)

### **Trade**

The term “trade” is used in several different ways, baffling to people outside of the publishing industry yet used without much thought by publishing insiders.

#### ***Book Trade***

The business of publishing books, usually referring to the procession from author to publisher to bookstore to consumer.

#### ***Trade Books***

Books published in the expectation they will be primarily sold through the standard book trade channels (bookstores and libraries). Synonymous with commercially-published books, and differentiated from academic books and self-published books. (*See Commercially Published Books.*)

#### ***Trade Paperbacks***

A high-quality, large format paperback book initially created to be sold through bookstores, and to provide bookstore-goers with less expensive, but still substantive, versions of hardcover books. Trade paperbacks originated to fill a gap between mass market paperbacks, which were mostly sold in grocery stores and drug stores—and seen as down-market and disposable—and expensive hardcover books. Still popular, trade paperbacks are also called “quality paperbacks” and sometimes just “paperback.”

## **Traditional Publisher** (*See Publisher*)