

Introduction for Self-Publishing

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Introduction

Origami artists will often think about getting their work in print after developing a collection of pieces they are proud of. There are quite a few options on getting your work realized on the printed page, with the Print on Demand (POD) approach becoming increasingly popular. Not all options are mutually exclusive, and you can have your work published in a variety of ways - provided all parties agree on the terms. Your work is like a property, as it can be sold for a limited duration, shared amongst different publishing entities, or you can even grant exclusivity and relinquish all future rights to your work.

It is possible that your work has commercial potential (which means it would be interesting to people outside of the fanatical origami community), and would be desirable to a commercial publisher. Advantages to going this route include the hand-holding that an outside publisher would provide. They would typically handle things like photography, layout and cover design. Once completed they would be responsible for your book's distribution. It is often the cheapest route as your publisher would typically pick up all your major expenses.

Using a commercial publisher is not for everyone. Shopping your manuscript around is often time-consuming and exasperating. If you are fortunate to be selected, your publisher will have final say on the contents of your work. Unfortunately, it is common for models to be dropped from the contents at the last minute. The gestation period is often frustrating, as it can be years until a publisher decides to release your work.

For those that want to take full control over their hard work, going the self-publishing route might make sense. The old way of doing this was to have large batches (in the thousands) of physical books printed that you would be responsible to distribute. Such printing presses will often use expensive printing blocks that will yield an excellent cost per unit. There is a cost for storing inventory and the initial investment for printing can be high. You would be fully responsible for distribution for years after the initial publication. Storage space will be a real consideration. If you are an established author, it might make sense to use this approach, but there might be a bit too much risk (in terms of unsold books) for first time authors.

The POD approach is a welcome means of book publishing for those who do not want to deal with large inventories or overbearing publishers. You get to work at your own pace and see your vision realized without compromise. The potential to maximize profits is there, as you can keep a far larger percentage than offered by a traditional publisher. However, the cost per unit is considerably higher with POD books, so being competitive can be tough. It is best suited for origami artists that have close ties with their potential audience, be it social media groups or origami organizations.

The Manuscript

When you self-publish, often what you put in is what you get out. Very few of us are capable at being both content creators and editors simultaneously. Getting outside eyes to look at your work is always advised, and you might want to consider having a collaborative effort. There are also many services that will handle things like cover design, editing and photography, but those costs can add up and those services are rarely idealized for niche things like origami. A common weakness is understanding layout and design, and it is worthwhile to educate yourself in this discipline. An excellent resource is the Design Index series by Jim Krouse, which includes books on layout, color and typography. It is perfectly kosher to steal ideas from other books, and even better when those ideas are lifted from books outside the origami genre (like a knitting book). There are many web resources that will allow you to identify colors and typefaces utilized so you can approximate a certain look.

PDF Primer

Going the self-published route will give you lots of flexibility in your choice of design tools. You can pick almost any drawing program and almost any photo editor is acceptable (commercial publishers will often dictate acceptable formats). However, when you are submitting your manuscript to a POD platform, you almost invariably need to supply a PDF.

Understanding the PDF format is helpful in producing a document that will not be rejected, unfortunately a very common problem. From the beginning when Adobe introduced (the then proprietary) Portable Document Format in the early 1990's, it was more of a wrapper (or encapsulated) type of format, rather than a native type of format. Native formats include things like an MS Word DOCX file or an Illustrator AI document that can only easily be read or edited in the program that created it. Converting such native formats to PDF creates a (near) universal interface to allow viewers and printing software to read (and often edit to some extent) these proprietary formats. There is a bit of reverse compatibility, as most native programs will allow you to open up a PDF that it created.

This reverse compatibility comes at a price, and most POD platforms will not accept such files. The extra information included will confuse their printing engines. You will need PDF processing software like Adobe's own Acrobat Pro or Nitro. There are cheaper alternatives out there, but they do not all comply with some of the exacting standards put out by the POD platforms. Almost all of them will allow you to stitch a series of PDF files together (a common procedure when compiling chapters of a book together). The key feature is how well they handle printing to PDF format.

Most people are first confused about the idea of taking a PDF file and then printing it as a PDF. The resulting file is typically a little bit smaller than the document upon which it was based. That difference in size is the result of stripping away all that backwards compatibility baggage. You can force your PDF printer to generate output that complies with various printing standards, typically one of the PDF/X variants that are optimized for printing and are welcomed by most POD printing engines.

Embedding Fonts

Simply printing to PDF/X does not always work, and there can be error messages. Often the culprit is a misbehaving font. The code that defines a font is typically proprietary, and printing engines at a POD do

not store the information necessary to generate a font. By embedding the font information into the document, a printer can use the font information without storing the font locally. Native software programs like Illustrator and MS Word allow you to specify that you would like your fonts to be embedded when generating a PDF. Sometimes (often for weird header fonts) the process does not work correctly. A workaround solution is to convert such text to images. The end result will look the same when printed, but with the text being an image, it will not be searchable (not an issue for a printed book).

A Word on Color

Some of the PDF/X variants are optimized for CMYK printing. This is preferable over RGB type formats. Although the latter scheme has fewer letters (representing Red Green and Blue), the color possibilities with RGB are richer and wider ranging. Unfortunately, they are suited for viewing on a computer monitor, as those are the three colors that a pixel can generate. For documents that will be printed, the more limited CMYK scheme is the one to use. So, even though it is tougher to make CMYK look nicer, working within the CMYK space while editing will give a more realistic gauge on how your book will print. This is because Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black are the standard colors used when printing.

There are some tricks on making your colors look better in the printed result. The closer your colors are to the primary CMY elements, the more they will pop off the page. So, for instance, using a pure yellow value of 100 will be very loud and bright. Elements that have a high “K” value (black) tend to look muddier. Of course, you will likely use pure black for your text which will often look sharp on the page.

Try to preview your work on various viewers and even monitors if possible. You will be surprised at how different your colors will render even between different applications on the same computer! Better monitors will mitigate this effect, but they can be extremely expensive. Calibrating your screen will often help a bit. A neat trick when picking colors is to use a physical swatch book. The most famous one is by Pantone, but this can be expensive and a little bit limited. A cheaper way is to get a paint swatch book and then look up the corresponding CMYK codes online.

Getting an ISBN

Another thing you will need to get published is an ISBN number. On the back of virtually all books you will see a zebra striped bar code with thirteen numerical digits (formerly ten digits). These unique identifiers are internationally recognized to keep track of books and book sales. If you intend your book to be sold commercially, you will need an ISBN number. Each country has their own ISBN issuing agency with different rules and pricing. Here in the USA purchasing a single ISBN number is expensive at \$125 USD. However, the pricing gets far cheaper when purchased in bulk, with ten going for \$ 295 USD and one hundred for only \$575. Other countries often provide these identifiers at far lower prices, and sometimes even for free.

As a first-time publisher you might wonder what you would do with all those ISBN numbers. A unique number is required for each version of your book. Softcovers (i.e., perfect bound) are considered different editions from hardcovers (i.e., caseback) and require a unique ISBN. Likewise, a foreign

translation of your book or an expanded edition will need a new number as well. Interestingly, digital formats are not as well standardized and are often referred to by an ASIN number.

To combat the prohibitive cost of ISBN's, there are services that purchase these numbers in bulk and will provide them to authors at a steep discount. Many of the POD services offer this as well. As tempting as it is to get these prices, keep in mind you are giving up a lot of publishing flexibility in this transaction. That is because you would not be the publisher, rather the entity that sold you the ISBN has control over your book. This reality can rear its ugly head when you try to get your book into smaller shops, or worse yet, the company you gave your rights to decides to move away from publishing and your book is no longer recognized. There are many articles on the pros and cons of this.

Get Incorporated

Even before purchasing an ISBN you will need to establish a business entity. Here in the USA there are plenty of options, all of which are viewed the same by the POD's when they issue your payments. However, tax benefits can vary, and consulting an accountant is advised to tailor towards your unique financial situation. Of course, this business entity can be used for other origami related jobs. A common scenario is requesting a tax exemption from the POD service for direct purchases. This way you can purchase books tax-free that you plan to sell to a store like The Origami Shop or The Source (who in turn will charge their customers tax). There is no need for the government to collect tax on your books twice!

Picking a POD

Often the big question is which POD to choose? There are a lot of options, but only two have the distribution power worth considering. KDP i(formerly CreateSpace) is a popular choice as it is owned by Amazon and using their services miraculously improves your visibility to potential customers on the Amazon platform. Getting your book seen on outside platforms however is much tougher, and your book is probably going to be invisible to the world outside of this retailer.

The other alternative is to use IngramSpark's Lightning Source which is the POD arm of the world's largest book distributor. The printing costs are considerably less than KDP and they offer hardcover options. However, your visibility will not be as good on the (very important) Amazon platform. Another negative is that it costs \$50 USD per book, and revisions cost \$25 USD. However, discount codes abound, and it is often possible to get your book processed for free.

A hybrid solution is to use a combination of the two platforms. Publish your book through IngramSpark and better yet, produce a hardcover version as well. It will take a couple of days for this manuscript to get processed. Use this time to create a Kindle version of your book. This digital version gets sent to the KDP platform. Be sure to enable wide distribution.

Amazon has something called Author Central (<https://authorcentral.amazon.com/>) to maintain profiles of authors and their books. It is also the place to link books. So, you would link your hardcover, soft cover, and (most importantly) your kindle version together. On the Amazon platform you will see pricing for all versions of your title on a single page. Since it is now linked to an Amazon publication, you will

have better product placement!

Metadata

Another important element to having your book seen is good metadata. POD platforms and ISBN agencies provide a place to enter in information about your book and its author. It is very important to maintain consistency! In the world of publishing “Robert Lang” and Robert J. Lang” would not be regarded as the same. The interfaces for metadata often have advanced options. They should be taken advantage of, as you can add category information (like handicraft and even as specific as origami) and include useful search terms.

Pricing Calculations

Your POD platform will also request pricing information which you will need to supply (but typically NOT print on your book itself). You will need to strike a balance of being competitive with traditionally published books while leaving yourself with some profit. Fortunately, origami books tend to be on the niche end of the spectrum and can be priced a little bit higher than competing products. To optimize your pricing, you should aim for a book that is around 120 pages, which the prolific author John Montroll calculated as being a sweet spot. Use the pricing calculators available through your POD to see what the cost is per unit. Multiply that by three and adjust the price to be palatable. For paperbacks \$19.95 USD is a good number to shoot for and \$34.95 USD works for hardcovers (assuming 120 pages). John Montroll actually suggests going a little higher on the hardcovers, as the target audience is Libraries that are not as concerned about competitive pricing.

Setting Discounted Pricing

The other part you need to establish (unfortunately not possible on KDP) are the standard discounts to retailers. The industry standard for bookstores is a 55% discount with the option to return (or destroy) unsold copies. The sad reality is that your books will rarely make it on the shelf of a retail store. Because of pricing and competitive leverage, a big publisher will have over you, having access to a store’s shelf space is almost impossible for a POD publisher. There are some exceptions, like selling to OrigamiUSA’s The Source or Nicolas Terry’s Origami Shop. For those entities, it is good practice to offer the 55% discount.

For online retail (where places like Barnes and Noble do not have to deal with the overhead of maintaining an inventory of your books), they are happy to accept your book at a mere 40% discount. This is the rate you should set your book at for wide distribution. Please note that sometimes Amazon will play a little “game” and delist your titles with this discount. Simply change the discount to 55% for a day and then change it back to 40% - it should “stick” after that change.

The Proof Copy

Once completed, you should order a physical proof of your book(s). If all goes well, this can be the copy that you can proudly display on your coffee table. Unfortunately, things might not print quite as

expected. Things to look out for include illegible (or poorly placed) spine text, images (especially on the cover) that do not bleed (extend beyond their base parameters) as expected. Colors that can look rich on your monitor might be too muddy to discern critical elements like fold lines and symbols; it is typically better to render your colors on the lighter side for visibility's sake. Fortunately, the POD world is a forgiving one, and you can fix your manuscript before having your book go live. Then, time to celebrate!