FROM THE 8TH ANNUAL STATE OF STORY GRID ADDRESS

The 2027 Publishing Path Guide

Traditional, self, or hybrid. What each one actually costs, what you trade away, what to ask before you sign, and how to decide which path your novel belongs on.

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STORY GRID

START HERE

The only question that matters

Before you query an agent, hire a cover designer, or sign anything, ask one question:

> Am I getting something of value in exchange for something of value?

A finished novel is valuable. You spent years building it. Too many writers forget that the moment they start trying to publish, and they start acting like the guy walking down the street begging anyone to take his car off his hands. "Three hundred bucks? Sure, thank you, just take it."

I drive a 2016 Prius. It is not a fancy car. But it has a value, and I am not handing it to anyone who offers me less than that. Your manuscript deserves at least the respect I give my Prius.

Every publishing path is a trade. You give up some mix of money, rights, control, and time. You get back some mix of money, production, distribution, and credibility. This guide is about seeing the trade clearly so you can make it on purpose.

One more thing before we start, and I say this as someone who dreamed as a kid of seeing his book face-out on a Barnes and Noble table: **do not make this decision emotionally.** The desire to be picked is real, and it is not a reason. We will come back to it at the end. For now, set it aside and look at what each path actually does for your book.

What a publisher actually does for a book

Strip away the mystique and a publisher does three jobs. Every path in this guide is just a different answer to who does each job and who pays for it.

1. Packaging. Editing (copyedit and proofread), cover design, interior design, and conversion into print and ebook formats. This is the job publishers usually do well. Here is the part most writers don't know: they almost always hire outside contractors to do it. The cover designer's name is often on the copyright page or in the acknowledgments. You can hire that same person.

2. Distribution. Getting the book where it can be bought. Online, this is a solved problem for everyone. Your ebook and print-on-demand paperback will be on Amazon and every other retailer whether you have a publisher or not. Physical bookstore shelves are different. Shelf space is limited and goes to backlist bestsellers and brand-name authors. A debut novel with a $5,000 advance is not getting stocked in bookstores, with or without a publisher. Your local store might take two or three copies because you asked.

3. Marketing. Getting people to actually buy the book. And here is the truth I need you to hear:

> Unless you are getting a $500,000 advance or more, the marketing is on you.

Publishers sort their list into tiers. The books they paid a million dollars for get almost all of the marketing budget and attention. Everything else gets thrown against the wall to see what sticks. If yours sticks, they will notice. If it doesn't, your editor has already moved on to the next book.

I have watched this happen to dozens of authors. They signed the deal, celebrated, the book came out, and within two weeks they couldn't get their editor on the phone.

So when you compare the paths below, keep the three jobs in mind. Packaging can be bought. Online distribution is free. Marketing is yours no matter what. The real question is what you are trading for the packaging, and whether the trade is worth it.

PATH 1

Traditional publishing

Traditional publishing makes sense in exactly two situations: you are famous enough to command a large advance, or you have zero dollars to invest in your book. For everyone else, it fails the value-for-value test. Here is why.

The process

1. **Finish the manuscript.** For fiction, nobody will talk to you until it is complete. Agents and editors need to see that you can finish.
2. **Get an agent.** Acquiring editors at the major houses rely on agents to bring them manuscripts. A few take direct submissions, but very few. You query agents, you get rejected a lot, and eventually one may ask for the full manuscript. They may ask for a rewrite before they take you on.
3. **Go on submission.** Your agent pitches your book to editors. If none of them buy it, the book is usually dead. Your agent will tell you to write the next one. The stories about the book rejected by thirty publishers that became a bestseller are famous because they are rare.
4. **Sign the deal.** If an editor buys it, you get an advance against royalties and sign over the rights to publish your book in every format, worldwide, for the life of the contract.
5. **Wait.** From signing to publication is a minimum of 12 months and usually closer to 18. If you have not started querying yet, you are realistically two to three years from a book on sale.

The math

The standard advance for a debut novelist without a platform is **$5,000 to $10,000**. Anything north of that is rare for a new unknown author with a small (or non existent) platform.

- Your agent takes 15%. On a $5,000 advance that is $750 to them and $4,250 to you.
- The advance is paid in two or three installments, usually six to twelve months apart. So you get checks of roughly $2,100 twice over one to two years.
- It is an advance *against* royalties. You earn nothing more until your royalties exceed what they already paid you. At traditional royalty rates (15 to 25% depending on format), earning out a $5,000 advance takes somewhere around 3,500 copies sold.
- Most traditionally published books sell about 250 copies in their first year. Only about 35% of a publisher's books turn a profit at all.

Now look at it from the agent's side, because this explains the rejections. On a $5,000 to $10,000 advance, the agent makes $750 to $1,500. That has to cover reading your manuscript, the calls, the proposal, the pitching, the follow-up, and the contract. If they spend more than 15 to 30 hours on your book they are working for under $50 an hour, and that is if it sells. Most don't. So a working agent can afford to spend about five to ten hours on any one debut. That is the math behind the 99% rejection rate. It is not personal.

What you give up

- The right to publish your own book in any format, anywhere, for the term of the contract. You keep the copyright. You cannot use it.
- Final say on the cover, the interior, the title, and the price.
- The ability to give copies away or run price promotions. Both drive sales. Both usually require permission you will struggle to get. A friend of mine spent two years getting approval for one price promotion on his own book.
- Your royalty rate: 15 to 25% instead of the 35 to 70% you keep on your own.

What you get

- Professional packaging, done by people who do it every day.
- Ebook and print distribution to every online retailer (which you can also get for free on your own).
- Access to a community. The blurbs from big-name authors on a debut's cover usually come through the agent's or publisher's relationships. That is hard to replicate alone.
- Eligibility for certain awards and media reviews. Nice for the ego. We have tracked it: reviews and even the big bestseller lists do not move sales the way people assume.
- An advance. Which, as we just saw, is two checks of $2,100.

If you still want to try

Then do it right, which means thinking like the agent instead of like the author. Three things make an agent's job easier and raise your odds:

1. **Market fit.** Show exactly where your book sits on the shelf and which bestselling books it sits next to. Do not pitch it as unlike anything ever written. That makes agents run.
2. **Publisher research.** Find out who published those comparable books, and which editor acquired them. "This editor at this house has bought three books like mine in two years" tells an agent you understand the business.
3. **Platform.** An audience you can reach. An email list, a following, anything that lets you say "this is how I will sell copies." I agree it is absurd that you have to be a world-class writer and a world-class marketer. It is also the state of the industry.

And know this: if you self-publish and your book starts to sell, agents will come to you. One agent I know built his practice watching the self-published charts and signing the authors who were already selling. Sales are the one query letter that never gets rejected.

PATH 2

Self-publishing

Self-publishing makes sense if you have $3,000 to $10,000 to invest and you are willing to run what is, honestly, a small business. If both of those are true, it is the path that keeps the most value in your hands.

What it really means

You are the publisher. You hire the copyeditor, the proofreader, the cover designer, and the interior designer. You buy the ISBNs, upload the files, set the price, and pay every invoice. The contractors are the same ones the big houses use. The difference is that you are coordinating them and paying them.

You can technically self-publish for $0 by uploading a document to Amazon. You can also spend six figures. I have friends who have done both. The range that produces a book indistinguishable from a traditionally published one is the $3,000 to $10,000 I itemize later in this guide.

Pros

- **You own everything.** Every right, every format, every decision, forever.
- **You keep most of the money.** Around 70% on ebooks and 35 to 60% on print, versus 15 to 25% traditionally. To put $5,000 in your pocket you need to sell roughly 700 copies on your own. Traditionally published, you need about 3,500 to earn out the same $5,000.
- **You control the marketing.** Give away a thousand copies if you want. Run a 99-cent promotion tomorrow. Bundle it, serialize it, sell it from your own site. Nobody has to approve anything.
- **Speed.** Your book can be on sale within weeks of the manuscript being finished, not two to three years.
- **It keeps the door open.** The myth is that self-publishing kills your chance at a traditional deal. It only does that if the book doesn't sell, and a book that doesn't sell would not have sold traditionally either. A self-published book that moves is the strongest pitch an agent ever receives.

Cons

- **You make every decision.** The control is the pro and the con. You are coordinating five contractors and a dozen deadlines on a project you have never run before.
- **No infrastructure.** Publishers have people who have done this a thousand times. You are learning as you go.
- **You will make mistakes.** When I published my first book, I was staring at the proof copy on my shelf when I realized we had printed the spine text in the wrong direction. Neither I nor my designer had ever published a book before. Expect at least one of those types of mistakes, and expect it to push your date.
- **No advance.** You put money in and hope to get it out. Given what the advance actually is (two checks of $2,100), this matters less than it sounds. But it is real money up front, and if you don't have it, you don't have it.
- **The marketing is still on you.** Same as traditional. The difference is that here, at least, nobody is handcuffing you while you do it.

PATH 3

Hybrid publishing

Hybrid is where most writers should be looking. It is not one thing. It is the whole spectrum between traditional and self-publishing, and the right spot on that spectrum depends on how much money, control, and work you want to trade.

The word "hybrid" gets used for everything from legitimate small presses to outright scams, so the questions and red flags later in this guide matter most here.

The publisher end of the spectrum

These are small presses that behave like a traditional publisher with a better deal. They are selective. They cover the production costs: editing, cover, interior, distribution. In exchange you give up some rights, usually fewer than a traditional contract takes, and for a shorter term. There is typically no advance, or a small one. The trade-off is in the royalty rate, which is far better than traditional, often double or more.

- **Pros:** No money out of pocket. Professional packaging. A real publisher's name on the spine. Much better royalties than traditional. Someone else runs the project.
- **Cons:** You still give up rights and some control. Smaller presses have smaller reach and thinner infrastructure. No meaningful advance. You still do the marketing.
- **Who it fits:** Writers who want a partner, don't want to run the business, and are willing to share the upside in exchange for the press carrying the costs.

For transparency: the publishing company Shawn and I run sits at this end of the spectrum.

The agency end of the spectrum

These are publishing services companies. You pay them a fee, they produce the book to professional standards, and you keep every right and every dollar of royalty. Think of it as hiring a general contractor instead of hiring the plumber, the electrician, and the roofer yourself.

- **Pros:** You keep all rights and all royalties. One vendor instead of five. Professionals who have done this many times, so fewer mistakes. Faster than traditional.
- **Cons:** You pay up front, usually more than you would assembling the contractors yourself, because you are paying for coordination. Quality varies enormously between companies. Some are excellent. Some are vanity presses with better websites.
- **Who it fits:** Writers who have the budget, want to own everything, and would rather pay for the project management than do it themselves.

How to read any hybrid offer

Run it through the one question. What are you giving (money, rights, royalty share, time)? What are you getting (production, distribution, a brand, expertise, sales)? Is it a fair trade? A press that covers costs and takes 50% of royalties for seven years may be a great deal or a terrible one depending on what they actually do to sell the book. A service that charges $8,000 and hands you a beautiful book with all your rights intact may be a bargain if you were going to spend $6,000 and two hundred hours doing it yourself.

> There is no right answer on the spectrum. There is only the trade, and whether it is fair.

THE BUDGET

What a well-produced book actually costs

A beautiful, professionally produced novel costs **$3,000 to $12,000** once the manuscript is locked. People assume it is far more, but it isn't.

These are hard production costs only. They assume the writing is done. Developmental editing, coaching, and anything that happens before the manuscript is final are a separate budget, and they belong to the writing, not the publishing. Ranges are typical industry rates for an 80,000-word novel in the United States.

ITEM	TYPICAL RANGE	NOTES
Cover design	$800 to $5,000	Spend the most here. The cover is the single biggest driver of whether a stranger picks up the book. The low end gets you a competent pro; the high end gets you the designers the big houses hire.
Copyedit	$1,000 to $3,000	Grammar, consistency, clarity, line by line. About 1.5 to 4 cents a word.
Proofread	$500 to $1,500	The final pass on the typeset pages. A different person than the copyeditor.
Interior design and formatting	$300 to $1,500	Print layout plus ebook conversion. Software like Vellum (about $250, one time) lets you do it yourself if you are willing to learn it.
ISBNs	$125 to $300	One ISBN per format. Buying a block of ten is cheaper than buying them one at a time. Amazon offers a free one, but it only works on Amazon.
Proof copies and author copies	$100 to $500	Print proofs to check before launch, plus copies to give away.
Total	$2,800 to $11,800	Most writers land between $3,000 and $10,000 depending on how far they go on the cover and the editing.

THE BUDGET, CONTINUED

A few notes on spending it well

Cover first, always.

A $500 cover from a freelance marketplace is the most common and most expensive mistake in self-publishing. It costs you every sale you never see. If you have to cut somewhere, cut the interior design and learn Vellum. Do not cut the cover.

Hire the people the publishers hire.

Open a traditionally published novel in your genre. The cover designer is often credited on the copyright page. Email them. Most are freelancers and most are reachable.

Two sets of eyes on the text.

A copyeditor and a separate proofreader. The person who has read it six times cannot see the typo on page 212. That is not a character flaw, it is how brains work.

Budget for a mistake.

Something will need to be redone. Hold back 10% for it.

> Compare this to the trade on the traditional side. For $5,000 or less you can produce the same book the publisher would have produced, keep every right, and keep 70% of every ebook sale instead of 25%. That is the comparison the value-for-value question is asking you to make.

DUE DILIGENCE

Questions to ask before you sign anything

Whether it is a publisher, a hybrid press, or a service company, these questions tell you what you are actually trading. A legitimate partner answers all of them without flinching.

About rights and money

1. Exactly which rights am I granting? Print, ebook, audio, foreign, film? For how long? What triggers them reverting to me?
2. What is the royalty rate, by format, and is it calculated on list price or net receipts? (Net can mean half of what you expected.)
3. How often will I be paid, and will I receive a royalty statement showing units sold by channel?
4. Is there any money I am expected to pay, now or later? Reading fees, setup fees, marketing packages, minimum copy purchases?
5. Who owns the ISBN? (If they do, they are the publisher of record, even if you paid for everything.)
6. Who owns the cover art and interior files? Can I take them with me if we part ways?

About the work

7. Who specifically will edit my book, and what is their background? Can I see a sample edit?
8. Who will design the cover? Can I see covers they have done in my genre?
9. What is the production timeline, step by step, with dates?
10. What distribution do you actually have? Online only, or do you have a sales team that gets books into physical stores? (Almost no one does. The honest answer is usually "online.")

About results

11. What do your books typically sell in the first year? Can you show me?
12. Can I speak to three of your authors? Not the ones on your testimonials page. Three I pick from your catalog.
13. What, specifically, will you do to market my book, and what will I be expected to do?
14. What happens if the book doesn't sell? What do I owe, what do you owe, and how do I get my rights back?

For a service company specifically

15. Is this a flat fee or will there be add-ons? Can I get the full price in writing before we start?
16. If I only want some services (cover and copyedit, say), can I buy those alone?

Pro move: run any contract they send you through a LLM such as Claude or ChatGPT along with the questions above. Ask the LLM to give you any red or yellow flags in the contract.

If an answer is vague, that is an answer. If they will not put it in writing, that is an answer too.

WARNING SIGNS

Red flags

Any one of these is a reason to slow down. Two or more is a reason to walk away.

- **They came to you.** Real publishers are drowning in submissions. A "publisher" that emails you after you post about your manuscript online is selling you something.
- **You were "selected" and then asked for money.** The oldest trick in the business. Acceptance that comes with an invoice is not acceptance. It is a sales funnel.
- **Reading fees or submission fees.** Legitimate agents and publishers do not charge to look at your work.
- **They want the rights and your money.** Pick one. A partner who covers costs can reasonably ask for rights. A vendor you are paying should leave you with everything.
- **They own the ISBN on a book you paid for.** That makes them the publisher of record on your dime.
- **The contract term is "life of copyright" with no reversion clause.** Your great-grandchildren will still be bound by it.
- **Royalties on "net" with no definition of net.** Net of what? Printing, shipping, marketing, their office rent? If it isn't defined, assume it means almost nothing reaches you.
- **Required bulk purchases.** You must buy 500 copies of your own book. Their business is selling books to authors, not to readers.
- **Guarantees.** Bestseller status, bookstore placement, media coverage. Nobody can guarantee any of these. Anyone who does is lying.
- **Pressure.** Sign this week, the slot is closing, the price goes up Friday. Your manuscript took years. A real partner can wait a month.
- **No authors you can talk to.** Or only the ones they choose.
- **Their books look bad.** Pull up their catalog on Amazon. Look at the covers. Read the samples. Check the sales rank. If their books look like books you would never buy, yours will too.
- **The marketing package.** A "platinum publicity tier" for several thousand dollars that consists of a press release and some social media posts. These never sell books. They sell packages.
- **You cannot find the real people.** No names, no bios, no address, no track record. Legitimate businesses are run by people who are willing to be known.

> One more that is not about them. **Your own desperation to be picked.** It is the thing every one of these operations is built to exploit. The writer who knows what their manuscript is worth is very hard to con.

THE DECISION

How to decide

Start by assuming you will self-publish. Not because self-publishing is best, but because it is the position where you own everything. From there, you only give something up if someone offers you something of equal value for it. That is the whole method.

Then answer four questions honestly.

1. **How important is speed?** Self-publishing or an agency-style hybrid puts the book out in months. Traditional is two to three years from today if you have not started querying. If you are 58 and have been at this for forty years, that number matters.
2. **How important is control?** Final say on the cover, the price, the promotions, the title. If you need it, you cannot sign a traditional contract. If you are happy to hand it off, a publisher-side hybrid or a traditional deal is on the table.
3. **How much money do you have to invest?** Zero means traditional or a publisher-side hybrid, because they carry the costs. $3,000 to $10,000 opens up self-publishing and the agency end of hybrid.
4. **How important is industry validation?** I will try to talk you out of this one. I have watched friends see their book on the shelf and hit the bestseller list, and the glow was gone within a week. But some writers need the logo on the spine, and if that is you, I would rather you know it than pretend otherwise.

Then decide and commit for at least a year. The writers who get stuck are the ones querying halfheartedly while half-planning to self-publish, pulled in two directions and making progress in neither. Pick one. Go hard.

Two things to keep the pressure down. First, this is not a permanent decision. Writers move from self-publishing to traditional and back all the time. Second, there are horror stories on every path. Picking one does not reduce your risk, it just changes its shape. Both roads are hard. Choose the hard road that matches your values and walk it.

> And remember, whatever you choose, the marketing is on you. So is the next book.

BEFORE ANY OF THIS

The part that comes first

Everything in this guide assumes one thing: that the manuscript is publishable. That a reader who picks it up cannot put it down.

No publishing path fixes a book that isn't there yet. A traditional deal will not fix it. A $5,000 cover will not fix it. The best hybrid press in the country will not fix it. The only thing that has ever fixed it is the writer building the skills to write at that level, and the data is clear that doing that alone, by trial and error, takes most writers about fifteen years.

That is the problem we built the Story Grid Dojo to solve. Daily practice, in the right order, with expert feedback on every piece of writing you submit, inside 24 hours. Sentences, then scenes, then short stories, then the novel. It is the path I laid out in the Address, built into software so it works for more than a handful of writers a year.

The beta is open to 100 writers at $197 a month, locked in for as long as you stay. It closes Friday night or when the seats are gone, whichever comes first, and then the Dojo closes to new members indefinitely.

storygrid.com/dojo

100 seats · $197/month, locked in
Closes Friday night

If you are not ready, that is fine too. Keep writing. Use this guide when the book is ready. And whatever path you take, remember that the thing you made has value. Trade it like it does.

Tim Grahl

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