

Self-Publishing Chapbooks: How to Do It Yourself

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If you have your manuscript polished and ready to self-publish, but your budget is limited, here are some tips for doing it yourself.

Chapbooks are traditionally cheaply produced booklets. They don't have to look cheap (though the funky photocopied look is certainly an option). The emphasis here will be on making relatively low-cost, high-quality chapbooks.

What's Needed

Recommended: To begin with, a professional **page layout software** such as InDesign, Pagemaker or Quark. If you are serious about producing books, it is well worth taking a course or teaching yourself how to use a good layout tool. While it is possible to "compose" (lay out) a booklet in a word processing program such as Word, the typographic and graphic tools are primitive and difficult to use. Take courses at the local JC and purchase software at low student rates.

The pages of your booklet will usually be 5½ x 8½ inches, which is a standard sheet folded in half, though booklets can be printed on legal sized paper or trimmed to smaller sizes. The pages must be "imposed" in proper print order so that they print four pages to a sheet, two on each side. The page layout software sets up booklets that print out collated, ready to fold and assemble.

Or you can type or wordprocess the pages, then cut and paste them up the old fashioned way, but you won't be able to print these yourself.

A good **laser printer with a duplexer**, either built in or as an optional accessory. You should invest in such a printer if you are going to be publishing and printing more than one chapbook for yourself or other writers; otherwise the books can be copied or offset printed at a service bureau. You can print the insides of the books yourself and even the covers (depending on cover weight) for considerably less than it would cost to have the pages photocopied, and they will look a lot better. Copying blurs the print slightly and if you want the booklets printed on bright white 24-lb. paper it will be expensive. Offset printing is also expensive. Your cost could be limited to toner, paper and wear and tear on the laser printer. If you shop around and get a good deal on a remanufactured printer, then in the long run you'll save money.

The best printers have postscript capability. Postscript is a printer language that is the standard for desktop publishing because it is supported by imagesetters, the very high-resolution printers used by service bureaus to produce camera-ready copy. Some of the loveliest fonts are postscript. But it isn't really critical unless you are having the cover of the chapbook offset printed. I have used Lexmark postscript emulation printers with good results. Some very reliable duplexing printers can be purchased refurbished for a few hundred dollars at www.marketpoint.com (a Lexmark distributor). I used the Lexmark Optra R+, which has a separate duplexing tray, till last year and now have a T420 with the duplexer built in.

The Process

Design tips:

Don't use lots of different fonts that detract from the message of your text. Don't use italics except for emphasis. Simpler is always better. Pay special attention to the cover, because that's the first thing people see. Look around at other books for design ideas and borrow these shamelessly (adding your own touches).

ISBN and bar codes: This can get expensive and may not be necessary. Setting up an ISBN account as a publisher the first time runs a few hundred dollars (\$270 to register and process a minimum of ten ISBNs). Bar coding software is relatively inexpensive, but to set one up, you need an official ISBN from Bowker, the United States agent that dispenses and keeps track of international standard book numbers. You should check with local bookstores to find out if they really require ISBNs to sell chapbooks.

Paper: Get thee to a paper warehouse (Kelly or JC in San Francisco, Arvey in Oakland, Paper Plus in Santa Rosa) and look at all the choices for covers and inside sheets. Select a 60-pound, white opaque paper that's laser rated and environmentally friendly (60-pound book paper is the same as 24-pound writing paper). But linens can be lovely, too. Consider a fly sheet, either translucent or in a contrasting color. Stay away from laid papers. Pick up samples and test them on your laser printer before investing in reams or cartons of paper.

Printing the “guts”: The sheets will emerge from a laser printer warm and slightly curled. Next step is to “press” them under some large, heavy books for a day or two. Generally the heaviest cover paper that will pass through a laser printer is 90-pound index.

Folding and assembly: I gave up on having them machine folded. The results were irregular and sometimes the booklets got smudged in the process. But try that for yourself. Maybe I’m too fussy.

Because here’s the labor intensive part: I fold by hand for quality control. I also check each sheet for toner smears or paper imperfections before folding it. If there are only 50 or 100 books, they ought to be perfect. I turn over several sheets, examining them (4 or 5 at a time), then fold. Those that don’t pass muster are discarded and the extra sheets from that booklet set aside and used to fill in for later discards. Cost to have books machine folded? Depends on quantity: maybe \$40 average? Results are so-so. Pages can get out of order.

Get a “bone” to fold the sheets with a sharp edge. These are found in art supply stores.

Offset printed or color covers: If you want a heavier cover or really fine art look, consider having 80-pound covers offset printed (there’s a much larger selection of 80-lb. cover paper) or get full-color covers laser printed at a service bureau on heavy matte or glossy stock (but glossy paper is more expensive). “Bleeds” are also expensive (when art or color extends to trim edge of the cover or pages). Heavier covers need to be “scored” at the service bureau, which makes folding easier. You can

then fold them yourself or have the bureau do it.

Stitch and trim: This is the final stage. Don’t even think about doing this yourself. I have a long-armed stapler which I use for the 8-page (2-sheet) catalogues; these are not trimmed, so it’s okay although time consuming. Any more than two sheets requires heavy-duty professional equipment for accurate trimming.

Alternatives

Consider **perfect binding** for books with over 64 pages. It requires good page layout skills, to keep costs down and deliver camera-ready files to a digital print house such as Gorham Printing in Seattle (www.gorhamprinting.com). They specialize in small runs of books in certain standard sizes with full-color covers and bleeds, and their rates are very reasonable. They provide clear guidelines for setting up books and will also supply an ISBN for a fee. These books can be larger (e.g., 6x9 inches) and as few as 25 copies may be ordered. The more copies printed, the less it will cost.

Print on Demand publishing of perfect bound books is relatively inexpensive and only one book has to be ordered, so this could be a place to start. Guidelines to preparing books are available on these sites as well. The drawbacks are that the books must be sold on the website of the company that prints on demand (e.g., www.lulu.com) and there may be hidden costs, such as shipping. Authors can buy their own books at cost plus shipping and resell them privately, but for small runs (under 100), the costs are too high to get them placed in retail bookstores.

Marketing Tips

- Create promotional pieces for your book (using cover design).
- Approach local bookstores and community groups to arrange readings.
- Go to open mikes and all literary events in your community, show your book off.
- Create an email announcement.
- Create a website or page for your book and put that in the signature of your emails.
- Have a book-signing, launch party.
- Send copies of the book to reviewers on local newspapers.
- Arrange to have book clubs read your book (e.g., fiction or memoir) and be at the discussion.
- List your book with amazon.com or other online bookstores. You can now sell new books on Amazon Marketplace, just like used book dealers do. Amazon takes the order and you ship books directly to the buyer. Amazon winds up paying you more than for books they retail directly (where there’s a large markup).



This is a work in process.
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Any questions or suggestions? Write to jo@wordrunner.com.
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