

Is Your Manuscript Ready?

A Self-Assessment Checklist
Before You Spend a Dollar on Production

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This checklist is not about whether your manuscript is good. It is about whether it is ready — ready to move from writing into the production phase of publishing.

Production means cover design, interior layout, metadata, distribution setup, and marketing infrastructure. It costs real money and takes real time. Starting production before the manuscript is actually ready is the most expensive mistake an author can make.

These twelve questions will help you figure out where you stand.

The Writing

[] **Has someone other than you read the full manuscript?**

Not your spouse, not your best friend — someone who can give you honest, informed feedback. This could be a beta reader, a writing group, a developmental editor, or a book coach. If the only person who has read your book is you, it is not ready.

[] **Have you addressed the feedback you received?**

Getting feedback is step one. Acting on it is step two. You do not have to agree with every note, but you should be able to articulate why you kept what you kept and changed what you changed. If you are still sitting on a stack of feedback you have not processed, pause here.

[] **Is the manuscript structurally complete?**

This means: the book has a beginning, middle, and end that work. For nonfiction, the argument builds logically, the chapters are in the right order, and the reader can follow the thread. For fiction, the narrative arc resolves. No placeholder chapters, no "I'll fix this later" sections.

[] **Are you done writing?**

This sounds obvious, but it matters. If you are still adding chapters, rethinking the ending, or considering a major structural change — you are still writing. Production is for finished manuscripts. Finished does not mean perfect. It means you have said what you came to say.

The Editing

[] **Do you know what level of editing your manuscript still needs?**

There are four levels of editing, and most books need at least two of them:

- **Developmental editing** — structure, argument, pacing, character development. The big-picture stuff. This comes first.
- **Line editing** — sentence-level clarity, flow, voice, and style. This is about how it reads.
- **Copyediting** — grammar, punctuation, consistency, fact-checking. The technical accuracy layer.
- **Proofreading** — the final pass for typos, formatting errors, and anything the previous rounds missed.

Not every book needs all four. But every book needs at least copyediting and proofreading. Some production partners (including us) can handle copyediting and proofreading as part of the production process. But developmental and line editing should be done before production begins — those are the rounds that can change the shape of the book.

[] **Is the manuscript clean?**

After editing, the manuscript should be free of tracked changes, comments, and revision marks. Formatting should be consistent — one font, standard paragraph spacing, consistent heading styles. This is not about making it pretty (that is the designer's job). It is about handing off a clean file that will not create problems downstream.

The Positioning

[] **Can you describe your ideal reader in one sentence?**

Not "anyone who likes nonfiction" or "people who enjoy thrillers." One specific sentence: "Executive coaches who want to write their first book but do not know how publishing works." If you cannot do this, your marketing will be unfocused and your cover designer will not know who to design for.

[] **Do you know what category or genre your book belongs in?**

Browse Amazon, walk through a bookstore, or look at BISAC codes. Where does your book sit? What shelf does it go on? If you are not sure, that is worth figuring out before production — because your category determines your cover design, your pricing, your metadata, and your distribution strategy.

[] **Do you have a working title and subtitle that make the book obvious?**

Your final title may change during production, but you should have a working version that tells a stranger — in plain language — what this book is about and who it is for. Clever titles do not sell books. Clear titles do. A reader browsing online or in a bookstore will give your title about two seconds. If they cannot tell what the book is and whether it is for them in that time, they move on.

For nonfiction especially, the subtitle does the heavy lifting. "The Confidence Gap" could be about anything. "The Confidence Gap: A Guide to Overcoming Fear and Self-Doubt for Women in

Leadership" tells you exactly what it is and who should read it. Aim for obvious, not clever.

The Business

[] **Do you know what formats you want to publish in?**

Paperback? Hardcover? Ebook? Audiobook? Each format has different production costs, timelines, and margins. You do not have to decide everything now, but you should know which formats you are starting with and why.

[] **Do you have a rough sense of your budget?**

Production costs vary widely depending on the scope of the project. But you should have a ballpark: Are you investing \$3,000 or \$30,000? Your budget determines which services you need, which you handle yourself, and what timeline is realistic. If you have no idea what things cost, that is worth researching before you commit.

[] **Do you have a plan for what happens after the book exists?**

This is the question most authors forget. You publish the book — then what? Do you have an email list? A speaking calendar? A professional network that will help spread the word? A marketing strategy does not have to be elaborate, but it does have to exist. A book with no plan behind it is an expensive business card.

Scoring Yourself

Count your honest "yes" answers:

10–12: You are ready.

Your manuscript is in strong shape for production. The next step is finding the right production partner and getting a cost estimate.

7–9: You are close.

There are a few gaps to close, but nothing that should take long. Address the areas where you said "no" and you will be ready soon.

4–6: You have work to do.

The manuscript needs more development before production makes sense. Investing in production now would likely mean paying for rework later.

0–3: Keep writing.

This is not a criticism — it means you are still in the writing and development phase. That is exactly where you should be. Finish the work before you start spending on production.

What to Do Next

If you scored well, the natural next step is a professional assessment — someone who can look at your specific manuscript and tell you exactly what production will involve and what it will cost.

If you scored lower than you expected, that is useful information. It is better to know now than to discover it after you have paid for a cover design on a manuscript that is not finished.

Either way, the goal is the same: publish a book that is ready, not just a book that is done.

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