

# The Publishing Ecosystem Map

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How the Roles Connect — and Where You Fit

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Publishing is not a single industry. It is an ecosystem of specialists — writers, editors, designers, marketers, distributors, retailers — who depend on each other but often work in isolation.

If you are a freelance publishing professional, understanding how your role connects to the roles around you is not just interesting — it is how you find better clients, build stronger partnerships, and do better work.

This guide maps the publishing ecosystem from manuscript to reader. It is designed for freelancers who work in publishing and want to understand the full picture — not just their corner of it.

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## The Five Stages of a Book

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Every book — indie or traditionally published — moves through the same five stages. The difference is who does the work at each stage.

- 1. Development** — The idea becomes a manuscript. This is where the author writes, and where developmental editors help shape the structure and argument.
  - 2. Editorial** — The manuscript becomes polished. Copyeditors, line editors, and proofreaders each play a distinct role here — they are not interchangeable.
  - 3. Production** — The polished text becomes a finished book. Cover designers, interior designers, typesetters, and ebook formatters turn words into a product.
  - 4. Distribution** — The finished book reaches the places where readers can find it. This includes online retailers, bookstores, libraries, and direct sales channels.
  - 5. Marketing** — Readers discover the book exists. This covers everything from metadata and Amazon categories to social media, email lists, and publicity.
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## The Roles — and How They Connect

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Here is every major role in the publishing ecosystem, what they do, and who they typically interact with.

## Development

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### Author

The origin of everything. An author may be a first-timer with a single manuscript or a career writer with a backlist of twenty titles.

- Works with: developmental editors, agents, writing coaches
- Needs from the ecosystem: honest feedback, production partners, marketing guidance
- Common gap: authors often do not know what they do not know — they need a guide through the process

### Developmental Editor

Works on the big picture — structure, argument, narrative arc, pacing. This happens before line editing or copyediting.

- Works with: authors, agents, acquisitions editors
- Connects to: copyeditors and line editors (the next stage)
- Common gap: authors sometimes skip this step and go straight to copyediting, which means fixing sentences in a book that has structural problems

### Literary Agent

Represents the author to traditional publishers. Pitches manuscripts, negotiates contracts, and manages the author-publisher relationship.

- Works with: authors, acquisitions editors at publishing houses
- Connects to: the entire traditional publishing pipeline
- Note: indie authors do not need agents — but agents increasingly work with hybrid authors who do both

# Editorial

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## Line Editor

Works at the sentence and paragraph level — clarity, flow, voice, readability. This is different from both developmental editing (bigger) and copyediting (more technical).

- Works with: authors, developmental editors (upstream), copyeditors (downstream)
- Common gap: many authors and even some editors blur the line between line editing and copyediting — they are distinct skills

## Copyeditor

Fixes grammar, spelling, punctuation, consistency, and factual accuracy. The manuscript should be structurally sound before it reaches a copyeditor.

- Works with: authors, line editors (upstream), proofreaders (downstream)
- Connects to: production — the copyedited manuscript is what goes to layout
- Common gap: authors sometimes expect copyeditors to fix structural problems — that is developmental editing

## Proofreader

The last set of eyes before publication. Catches typos, formatting errors, and anything that slipped through earlier rounds.

- Works with: copyeditors (upstream), designers and typesetters (they proof the laid-out pages, not just the manuscript)
- Common gap: proofreading happens after layout, not before — proofing a manuscript is copyediting

## Production

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### Cover Designer

Creates the front cover, back cover, and spine. The cover is the single most important marketing asset a book has.

- Works with: authors, art directors, marketing (the cover must work as a thumbnail on Amazon as well as a physical object)
- Common gap: authors who design their own covers without understanding genre conventions — readers judge books by covers, and they judge fast

### Interior Designer / Typesetter

Designs the interior layout — margins, fonts, chapter headings, running headers, page numbers. Makes the book feel professional.

- Works with: copyeditors (receives the final manuscript), proofreaders (proofing happens on laid-out pages), ebook formatters
- Common gap: authors who use a Word document as their final interior — it works, but it rarely looks professional

### Ebook Formatter

Converts the manuscript into ebook formats (EPUB, MOBI/KPF). Ebooks have different constraints than print — reflowable text, device compatibility, metadata.

- Works with: interior designers, authors, distributors
- Common gap: assuming the print interior file can be directly converted to ebook — ebooks need their own formatting

## Distribution

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### Distributor / Aggregator

Gets the book into retail and library channels. For indie authors, this means platforms like IngramSpark, KDP, Draft2Digital, or PublishDrive.

- Works with: authors (indie), publishers (traditional), retailers, libraries
- Common gap: authors who publish only on Amazon and miss the library, bookstore, and international markets that Ingram opens up

### Retailer

Sells the book to readers. Online (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple Books, Kobo) and brick-and-mortar (independent bookstores, chains).

- Works with: distributors, publishers, authors (direct sales)
- Common gap: indie authors who ignore bookstores — independent bookstores will stock indie titles if you approach them properly and offer standard trade terms

## Marketing

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### Book Marketer / Publicist

Gets the book in front of readers through media coverage, reviews, events, social media, advertising, and email marketing.

- Works with: authors, cover designers (they need marketing assets), retailers (promotions and placement)
- Common gap: authors who think marketing starts at launch — it should start months before the book is published

### Author Platform Builder

Helps the author build an audience — email lists, social media presence, speaking engagements, podcast appearances, content strategy.

- Works with: authors, marketers, web designers
- Common gap: authors who focus on selling the book instead of building a readership — the audience outlasts any single title

### Web Designer / Developer

Builds the author's website — book pages, about pages, email signup, blog, and direct sales functionality.

- Works with: authors, platform builders, marketers
- Common gap: author websites that look nice but have no email capture, no clear call to action, and no way to buy the book directly

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## Indie vs. Traditional — Who Does What?

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In traditional publishing, a publisher handles editorial, production, distribution, and (some) marketing. The author focuses on writing and promotion.

In indie publishing, the author is the project manager. They hire freelancers for every role — or work with a concierge agency that coordinates the process.

Neither model is better. Traditional publishing is powerful if you are building a long-term writing career and want an established partner. Indie publishing is powerful if you want speed, control, and full ownership of your rights and revenue.

Many authors today are hybrid — traditionally published for some titles, indie for others. The ecosystem supports both.

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## Where You Fit In

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If you are a freelance publishing professional, here are three questions worth asking yourself:

- **Who is upstream from you?** — Who does the work that feeds into yours? Building relationships with those people means better-prepared projects landing on your desk.
- **Who is downstream from you?** — Who picks up after you finish? Being able to recommend great downstream partners makes you more valuable to your clients.
- **What do your clients not know they need?** — Authors especially tend to skip steps or misunderstand the sequence. If you can help them see the full picture, you become a guide — not just a vendor.

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