

## U.S. Publishing Terms

**add-on** extra value added into a product, for example a CD-Rom in the back of a book

**Advance** - The money a publisher pays an author to publish their book. This money is an *advance* against royalties. This means that the author does not receive additional money from the publisher until the book earns an amount of money equal to the advance (see "earn out"). As long as the book is published the author does not have to pay the advance back, even if the book does not earn out. Large advances are typically paid in installments, such as a portion on signing, a portion on delivery and acceptance, and a portion on publication. Advances range from \$1 to \$1,000,000 or more.

**advance copy** the printed copy available once the book is printed and ahead of publication. Advance copies will be sent to the author and used in marketing

**Agent** - A publishing professional who shepherds books and authors through the publication process. An agent will submit a book project to editors, negotiate advances and contracts, follow-up on payments, and more generally serve as a creative and business adviser to an author (and much much more). An agent is the author's advocate.

**ARCs** - Advance copies of a book for review. While terminology varies by publisher, ARCs are typically distinguished from bound galley proofs because they feature the actual cover of the book.

**Association of Author's Representatives ("AAR")** - An organization of agencies who abide by a [canon of ethics](#) and host meetings and panel discussions to keep agents informed about trends and issues facing the industry.

**Auction** - When multiple publishing houses are interested in acquiring a project they will sometimes bid against each other in an auction. While auction formats vary, typically the bids will proceed from lowest to highest and they last until one publisher has the highest bid and others have dropped out. Auctions are a good thing for authors and agents.

**Backlist** - These are books that have been out for a while but whose rights publishers still possess.

**"Big Six"** - The six largest publishers: Random House, Penguin Group, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Hachette, and Macmillan

**Blurb** - A quote from an author or reviewer in praise of a book. Blurbs may or may not be on the cover of a book.

**Book Expo of America ("BEA")** - An annual, massive book convention in the US attended by publishers, agents, authors, librarians, bookstore reps, and random hangers-on.

**Book plates** - Stickers that go in the front of a book and often allow the owner of the book to sign their name. Book plates are a popular way for children's book authors to sign books (since book plates are more portable).

**Bound Galleys** - (see "galleys")

**British Commonwealth** - A huge list of countries, territories, and random islands, many of which you may not have ever known existed, and which were once apparently colonized by Mother Britain. The British Commonwealth is important in publishing as it is often the countries and territories where British publishers will have exclusivity (see "exclusivity"). To make it still more confusing, the list of British Commonwealth territories varies from publisher to publisher.

**Buyer** - The person at a bookstore or library who is responsible for ordering books.

**Commission** - The amount an agent receives for their services. Agents typically receive a commission of 15% for all domestic sales and 20% for foreign sales, which is split between the primary agent and a subagent (see "subagent"). Agents only receive commission on works they sell, and thus aren't paid unless the author is paid.

**Co-op** - You know those books at the front of Barnes & Noble? Those books didn't hitchhike there themselves: that placement is typically paid for by the publisher. Publishers make certain titles "available for co-op" and work out payment arrangements and special promotions, and it is then up to the bookstore to decide which titles get to go up front.

**Copyeditor** - A grammar and spelling ninja who is responsible for making sure books do not have typos, geographical errors, or dangling modifiers. Not to be confused with Editors.

**Copyright** - The legal right of ownership of a written work. Copyright in the US lasts for the author's life plus 70 years. Your work is technically copyrighted when you write it, although you want to make sure your publisher registers copyright of your work in your name with the Library of Congress within three months of its publication for legal reasons that you are free to research on your own if you have too much time on your hands.

**Debut novel** - An author's first published novel, not necessarily the first book they've written.

**Delivery and Acceptance ("D&A")** - The happy time when a publisher officially accepts a book for publication. This may trigger a D&A payment (see "advance").

**Delivery date** - When your manuscript is due. Write it in the calendar in blood (but tell your agent if you think you're going to miss it).

**Digital List Price ("DLP")** - In digital audio and e-book land this is the price the publisher or rights holder places on a copy of their digital content. This may or may not have any bearing whatsoever on the price the e-publisher actually charges.

**Distributor** - The company that gets books from a publisher to bookstores, libraries, etc. Most major and some mid-major publishers function as their own distributors, while others use third parties. (see "wholesaler" for differentiation)

**DRM** - Digital Rights Management. This is software encryption that (theoretically) discourages piracy and which allows publisher to do fancy things like sync your e-book between your Kindle and your iPhone.

**Earn out** - When your book has earned more revenue than you were paid as an advance it is said to have "earned out." From here on out you get royalties on all "net sales" and all subrights income. Congratulations!

**Editor** - A publishing professional who works at a publishing house. An editor receives submissions (usually from agents), acquires projects, negotiates advances, and then coordinates with the different teams at a publisher throughout the publication process, such as production, sales, marketing, etc., basically making a book happen. An editor will typically be a savvy networker, have impeccable taste, and live in Brooklyn.

**Editorial letter** - The list of suggested changes an editor will ask an author to make prior to publication. Not every single tiny suggestion must be taken, but an author would do well to please their editor.

**Exclusivity** - 1. When an unpublished author gives an agent an "exclusive" look at their manuscript, usually for a period of time. This means the author cannot then send their manuscript to another agent during that time period. 2. Exclusivity can also refer to the exclusive rights and territory that are granted to a publisher in a publishing contract (see also "territory").

**First pass pages** - Once the manuscript is copyedited, the pages are then type-set and designed to look like how they'll look when the book is bound. A copy of these pages are then sent back to the editor and author, who check for any last minute errors that might have been missed or possibly introduced during the type-setting.

**First proceeds** - When a book is rejected for publication due to being editorially unacceptable some publishing contracts will allow the author to retain the advance and only repay the publisher out of the "first proceeds" from the sale to another publisher. Basically the author uses Publisher #2 to pay back Publisher #1.

**First serial** - Publication of an excerpt in a magazine or journal prior to book publication. (see also "Second Serial")

**Flow through** - In some contracts when there is subrights income (see "subrights") the author's share of the revenue is allowed to "flow through" directly to the author without being held by the publisher until the end of a royalty period.

**Front list** - A publisher's books that have come out recently.

**Galleys** - Advance copies of a book for review. While terminology varies by publisher, galleys are typically distinguished from ARCs as they feature a generic cover.

**Genre fiction** - A blanket term that refers to books with certain familiar settings and plot conventions. Genres include romance, science fiction, mystery and suspense, westerns, etc.

**Hardcover** - Books that are bound in cardboard or some other sturdy fashion, possibly featuring a dust jacket, and usually retailing at a higher price than paperbacks.

**Imprint** - The entity within a publisher whose name is printed on the spine of a book and which theoretically has a certain publishing "flavor." An imprint may be a division within a publishing house (Knopf, HarperCollins, etc.), it may be based around a certain genre (Harlequin Silhouette, Harlequin Blaze, etc.) or it may be a "boutique" imprint named after editor(s) (Nan A. Talese, Spiegel & Grau, etc.). Keeping imprints straight and remembering who reports to whom takes years of familiarity with the publishing industry and gigantic spreadsheets.

**Indemnity** - In a publishing contract a publisher will typically require the author to indemnify the publisher against losses sustained due to a breach in the author's warranty (see also "warranty"). In English: if the author screws up and plagiarizes someone or doesn't clear their permissions properly the author is the one on the hook.

**Literary fiction** - Fiction that is characterized by a plot that is typically [beneath the surface](#) and which is usually characterized by a unique and recognizable prose style.

**Literary scout** - A scout is someone who keeps tabs on all the hot books out there, usually on behalf of either film studios/producers or foreign publishers.

**Mass market paperback** - Rack sized paperback. Basically the size you usually see at the grocery store.

**Midlist** - Midlist titles are those that are literally in the middle of the range of advances and sales on a publisher's list. Typically midlist authors have a solid fan base but are not bestsellers. Some say the midlist is disappearing as publishers increasingly focus on their bestselling authors.

**Narrative nonfiction** - Nonfiction that illuminates through story. Examples of narrative nonfiction include narrative history (THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN, DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY), true crime (IN COLD BLOOD, HELTER SKELTER), memoir

(MY MEMOIRS by Insert Author), etc.

**Net Amount Received** - Usually the amount actually received by the publisher from sales of a work, sometimes also after taking out taxes and/or certain expenses (watch those contract definitions!).

**Net sales** - The number of actual sales after deducting returns. Also known as "sell through".

**Nonexclusivity** - When a publisher only has nonexclusive rights in a certain territory the author may then grant those rights to another publisher as well.

**North America** - For the purposes of publishing terminology, usually refers to English speaking North America, i.e. the United States and Canada. Sorry Mexico and Central America! Nothing personal.

**Omnibus** - When multiple books are collected into one volume it's called an omnibus.

**Open market** - When rights have been granted exclusively in North America and the British Commonwealth the rest of the world is typically considered an open market. This means both the US and the British publisher may sell there.

**Option** - A provision in a contract that typically gives the publisher an exclusive period of time to consider and offer on the author's next work. The option may be limited or allow the publisher certain financial matching rights, so keep a close eye on this.

**Out of print** - When a book is no longer being actively sold by a publisher it is said to be out of print, and often an author will be able to "revert" the rights. This term has gotten a little nebulous in the era of e-books and print on demand, so make sure your contract has a solid definition.

**Partial** - A partial manuscript. When an agent likes a query they may ask to see a certain number of pages or chapters. If they don't specify, just send 50 pages.

**Pitch letter** - An agent's letter to an editor telling them why they absolutely need to buy a book the agent is shopping.

**Pre-empt** - When a publisher really likes a project they may make an aggressive offer in order to pre-empt an auction (also known as "taking the book off the table"). The agent and author then has to decide whether to accept the offer or take their chances with an auction.

**Print on Demand ("POD")** - Copies of a book printed to order. POD is sometimes used as a blanket term for self-publishing, but POD may also be used by publishers to fill orders for backlist titles.

**Print run** - The number of copies a publisher prints of a book. There is an "announced" print run and an "actual" print run, and the difference between those numbers is something probably best not discussed.

**Publisher (company)** - The company that publishes your book.

**Publisher (person)** - A publishing executive who runs either a publishing division or an imprint and who typically has final say over what gets published.

**Query letter** - A letter describing your book, which will hopefully make an agent want to read more. See how to write a basic one [here](#), and see a good one [here](#).

**Reserves against returns** - Since publishers usually calculate royalty statements within six months after publication, sometimes returns will lag behind the statements. Since an author is paid based on net copies sold, this creates a conundrum since publishers don't really know what the "net" will be for quite some time after a book is published. In order to account for this publishers hold a "reserve against returns" for the first couple of royalty statements after a book's publication, which means they hold back a certain amount of money in anticipation of returns. The reserve should be a reasonable amount (talk to your agent) and they should not hold a reserve forever. (see also "returns," "net copies," and "royalty statements")

**Remainder** - Sometimes when a book isn't selling a publisher will sell off their remaining stock as a "remainder," which means at a low low price. This is usually a sign the book is going "out of print."

**Retail price** - The price of a book as listed on cover. Often royalties are paid as a percentage of the retail price of a book.

**Reprint** - 1. May refer to a publisher going back to press to print more copies. This is good. 2. May refer to a publisher bringing out a new edition of a book that has been previously published.

**Returns** - Bookstores are almost always able to return unsold copies of books back to the publisher for a refund. This causes a great deal of chaos (see also "reserves against returns").

**Reversion** - When your book is out of print you may have the right to "revert" your book, depending on your contract language. Basically this means the contract is canceled and the author can sell the rights to a new publisher.

**Rhetorical questions** - the devil's preferred method of beginning query letters

**Royalties** - The amount an author receives on every net copy sold of their book (see "net sales"). Royalties are either based on the cover price of a book or on the net amount received (see "net amount received") by the publisher. An author does not receive royalty

payments from a publisher until their advance has earned out (see "earn out").

**Royalty period** - The accounting schedule for royalties. Most major publisher calculate royalties twice a year and send the agent/author statements and payments several months after the close of a royalty period.

**Royalty statement** - A statement of gross copies sold, net sales, subrights income, returns, reserves, money owed, advances paid, lunar cycles, cake recipes, and ancient Egyptian prophecies. Royalty statements may or may not be completely incomprehensible to anyone who has not spent years working in the publishing industry. Bonus points for illegibility.

**Season** - Publishers organize their titles by season. Typically there are three seasons a year, which might mean that one publisher's "Spring" really means "Winter" while another publisher's "Spring" really means "Spring." Keeping publishers' seasons straight is a nearly impossible task, although for some reason everyone seems to know what "Fall" means. The Mayans they are not.

**Second serial** - Publication of an excerpt in a magazine or journal after book publication. (see also "First Serial")

**Self-publishing** - When an author arranges for their own publication and distribution, usually (but not always) through a POD service. Sometimes referred to as vanity publishing and POD, although as anon@7:32 notes in the comments section, self-publishing, vanity publishing, and POD have slightly different meanings and connotations. Vanity publishing usually refers to a service where the author pays to have their book published, self-publishing is more of a blanket term and may or may not involve paying up front, and POD has more to do with the process by which the book is produced (see "POD") than the self-publishing itself.

**Sell-in** - The amount of copies that are ordered by bookstores, libraries, etc. prior to publication. You want this to be a high number.

**Sell through** - See "net sales."

**Subagent** - An agent who sells subsidiary rights on behalf of a primary agent. Subagents are most common with translation and film/TV rights.

**Subsidiary rights (aka "Subrights)** - These are all rights under the sun that aren't original print publication rights, such as excerpt, adaptation, film/tv, audio, translation, first serial, second serial, merchandising, etc., etc. and I mean it etc. Some of these are retained by the publisher, who may exercise the rights themselves or sell them to third parties, some of these rights are retained by the author. When they are sold by the publisher to third parties the revenue is called "subrights income," which is subject to a certain percentage split between publisher and author as specified by the contract. Subrights income counts toward an author's revenues, thus helping an advance "earn out."

**Synopsis** - A summary of a work that covers the major plot points and characters. See [this post](#) for information on how to write one.

**Term of copyright** - Most contracts for original publication in the US are for term of copyright, which literally means for the length of copyright, and the author only gets the rights back if it goes out of print and the author reverts the rights (see "out of print" and "reversion").

**Term of license** - Sometimes contracts are for a set number of years. Terms of license are usually either based on the contract date or on the date of publication.

**Tie-in** - An edition of the book that ties in with a movie or TV show adaptation, usually featuring the movie cover or TV art.

**Trade paperback** - Mid-size paperback.

**Territory** - The countries in which rights are granted in a publishing contract.

**Unearned** - When an advance has not "earned out" the book is said to be "unearned."

**Warranty** - The part of a publishing contract where the author swears on their life that they are not plagiarizing anyone and everything is on the up and up (see also "Indemnity").

**Wholesaler** - Companies that get books to bookstores, libraries, etc. Unlike distributors, which fill orders for one or a few publishers, wholesalers fill orders for basically everything under the sun. Prominent wholesalers include Baker & Taylor and Ingram.