

HOW LONG SHOULD MY SELF-PUBLISHED BOOK BE?



If you have a contract with a traditional publisher, they will tell you exactly how many words or pages they want you to write. As a self-published author, you have no one to tell you. That is obviously a good thing, but it is also a cause for doubt among indie writers.

So, let us deal with this question once and for all.

How Long Should My Self-Published Book Be?

I get this question A LOT from writers.

The quick answer is: it depends.

Strangely, this reply does not satisfy them, so here we will go more in depth with the topic.

Do Your Research

One way to define the best number of words or pages is to look at what other writers are doing. Namely, the writers with best-selling books.

Why should you care?

Because there will often be a good reason why a book reaches the top of the best-seller lists, and that is that it meets readers' expectations. When that happens, it means happy readers. And happy readers are more likely to buy your next book or your older books.

The easiest place to do this research is Amazon.com, because it is the biggest online bookstore. Even if you also sell your books elsewhere, Amazon will give you a good impression of what readers want.

I have left a link to the best-seller lists below.

The best way to do research is by opening an incognito window in Firefox or Chrome. When you do simple searches on Amazon, they will offer you items you have already expressed an interest in, and that is not what you want right now. If you only check the best-seller lists, it is not nearly as important to be in an incognito window, but Amazon will send you emails promoting things you looked at. So, you can save yourself a lot of emails by using an incognito window.

Once you have opened an incognito window, you can go to <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers/zgbs> and choose either “Books” if you plan only to publish a paperback or Kindle Store and then Kindle eBooks if you plan to publish an eBook and maybe also a paperback.

Then locate a category that is relevant for your coming book and check how many pages the top twenty books consist of. Sometimes those twenty books will show an even number of pages, like all are around 300 pages. At other times, there are books down to eleven pages while others go up to 400.

This Sounds Good... or What?

If all the books are around the same number of pages, then your audience will expect a book to be around that number of pages. If your book falls outside this average, you risk having disappointed customers. That means bad reviews and often also fewer sales.

If you still want to publish a book that falls outside the norm for that category, you can mention that it is a short or long book on the cover and/or in the description. This will sometimes help to soften up the reviews, as with this book review:

https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R29H3K813223XR/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B07H3Y52RP

Which Is Better? Too Short or Too Long?

Neither is better. But if you ask if short is better than long, then the answer will be different. Let me explain.

Let us say that almost all the books in your category are 300 pages long. For some reason, and we will get back to this, you cannot hit that number of pages. Would it be better if your book was 100 pages long or 400?

There is a lot that speaks for writing shorter books.

First, Amazon has created an area of their Kindle Store dedicated only to short reads. They did not just do this as a random act.

They saw their customers liked short books and decided to make a whole area about short books, sorted after categories and length.

A customer can go to Amazon and look for a book that takes them 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, one hour, 90 minutes or two hours or more to read. In this way a customer can buy the perfect book for his bus ride or for a quick break at work.

Second, if you had planned a longer book, you can instead split it up in related areas and publish it as a series. That gives you more discoverability because for each extra book you publish, you get an extra chance of a customer finding your book.

But let us say that you find that there is no certain reader expectation for your book. Some of the top twenty books have 50 pages, others 400. Where should you aim?

The Perfect Length for Your Book

The perfect length for your book is when you have said what you wanted to say. No more and no less.

If you write nonfiction, it is best to start with an outline following a structure that makes sure you do not skip important points. You can write this outline in a linear form inside the word processor of your choice.

Or you can use a mind map tool and draw out the outline. The latter lets you add points easily if more comes to mind.

The time you spend on your outline will save you plenty of time later. You will be less likely to move chapters around and rewrite. And it will also give you an impression of exactly how much you need to put into your book.

Do not add fluff or filler just to get a higher page count. Your readers will not appreciate this. And in most cases, you can charge the same price for a book with 100 pages as for a book with 400 pages.

If you write fiction and do not outline beforehand, then your book needs to be exactly as long as your story takes you. Do not try to force a novel out of a story that cannot be longer than a short story. And do not cut down your novel to become a novella, just because... You need to close all open loops, you need to have your validation at the end.

If you try to force your story into a format it was not meant for, you will kill your story. It is much better to let your creative mind be in charge and then just accept the number of pages you end up with.

So, What Is the Answer to All This?

How long should your book be?

If you can hit reader expectations, do that. If not, then let your customers know beforehand that your book is short or long. And then make it as long as it demands to be.

References:

Bestseller lists: <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers/zgbs>

https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R29H3K813223XR/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B07H3Y52RP

Short reads:

https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Kindle-Store-Short-Reads/zgbs/digital-text/8584457011/ref=zg_bs_nav_kstore_1_kstore