

Indie Author Roadmap: From First Draft to Book Launch

A comprehensive guide to the major phases of writing, publishing, and marketing an indie novel.

Phase 1: Finish the Story

Goal	Complete the manuscript before worrying about perfection.
Detailed Tasks	• Finish the first draft. • Avoid editing while drafting whenever possible. • Let the manuscript rest for 2–4 weeks. • Read it straight through as a reader. • Revise plot holes, pacing, character arcs, continuity, and story logic. • Plan the outline early. Start with the major acts and the chapters or scenes you already know you want. • Think of the outline like the framework of a movie: build the structure first, then fill in the scenes and details as you draft.

Phase 2: Developmental Editing

Purpose	Strengthen the story at the big-picture level.
Detailed Tasks	• Evaluate plot, pacing, structure, character development, worldbuilding, emotional impact, POV consistency, and ending satisfaction. • Work through every editorial comment. • Rewrite scenes, add or remove chapters, and revise until the story feels complete.
Practical Timing	Give yourself at least six months for editing and proofreading before you reach the final upload and formatting stages. Build extra time into the schedule so revisions are not rushed.

Phase 3: Line Editing

Purpose	Polish the writing itself.
Detailed Tasks	• Improve sentence flow. • Strengthen dialogue. • Enhance word choice and voice. • Reduce repetition. • Improve descriptions. • Replace telling with showing where appropriate. • AutoCrit can be especially helpful for beginner writers who want analysis, reports, and a clear place to start strengthening a manuscript. • AutoCrit also offers useful line-editing tools once the larger story revisions are complete.

Phase 4: Copy Editing (A professional may charge \$0.010-0.030 per word)

Purpose	Correct technical writing issues.
Detailed Tasks	• Grammar • Spelling • Punctuation • Timeline consistency • Character names • Formatting consistency • Continuity issues

Phase 5: Self-Editing

Purpose	Perform one more detailed review before readers.
Detailed Tasks	• Read aloud. • Use ProWritingAid and/or AutoCrit. • Use text-to-speech to catch awkward phrasing. • Watch for overused words, repeated phrases, awkward dialogue, and missing words.
Software Notes	Use editing software as a tool, not as the final authority. ProWritingAid can

	sometimes suggest unnatural, dated, or overly formal rewording, so contemporary dialogue and phrasing should always be reviewed in context. AutoCrit is useful for manuscript analysis, reporting, and line editing.
Budget Note	Be prepared to spend hundreds of dollars on editing and writing software over the course of the project. Budget for subscriptions and tools early rather than treating them as last-minute expenses.

Phase 6: Beta Readers

Purpose	Gather reader-focused feedback.
Detailed Tasks	- Recruit 10–30 readers from your target audience. - Ask whether the pacing worked, favorite/least favorite characters, confusing scenes, believable plot, satisfying ending, and whether they would recommend the book. - Focus on recurring feedback rather than isolated opinions.
Practical Note	Beta readers are optional, not a requirement. If you use them and confidentiality is important to you, consider having readers sign an NDA or confidentiality agreement before receiving the manuscript. Create a google forms NDA that they sign before you give them a copy of the book.

Phase 7: Final Proofread

Purpose	Catch remaining errors.
Detailed Tasks	- Fix typos. - Correct formatting. - Verify chapter and scene breaks. - Complete a final polish before formatting.

Phase 8: Cover Design & Branding

Timing	3–6 months before release.
Detailed Tasks	

	● Finalize ebook, paperback, and hardcover covers. Fiverr is a great place to find a designer as well as Etsy. ● Create series branding. Etsy has some great templates for author branding. They are typically Canva branding templates. This is where you become a Canva expert. Eventually you will create your own templates. ● Design bookmarks, stickers, business cards, QR codes, banners, review cards, and social media graphics. Fiverr is again a great place to find artists to illustrate work for your book.
Special Editions	Wait on premium special-edition features such as specialty binding or sprayed edges until the book has demonstrated demand through pre-orders, sales, and reviews. The higher print cost should make financial sense for the audience you have built.
Budget Early	Begin saving well before launch for marketing and event materials, including Canva Pro, stickers, bookmarks, signs, banners, table displays, and other printed collateral.

Phase 9: Publishing Setup

Timing	2–3 months before release.
Detailed Tasks	● Create accounts and profiles for KDP, IngramSpark, Barnes & Noble Press, create a website, and social media pages. ● Purchase or assign ISBNs if you already have them. You will need one for each type of print (ebook, paperback, hard cover) for each title you plan to publish. Bowker is the best place. Don't use the "free ISBN's through each of the publishing tools like Ingram, KDP or Barnes as they will then be the "publishers" and own a portion of the royalties.

	Definitely create a copyright registration. Copyright your title, book, manuscript, cover, everything!!
Print-Cost Note	Page count is a major driver of print cost. Watch manuscript length and trim size because a longer book can significantly reduce your margin on each copy. For example, a book with 110k words, printed on a 5.5x8.5 size book, at 11 point font costs about \$8.25 each.
Genre Positioning	Know your genre expectations and tropes early. For contemporary romance, a practical target is often to stay under about 100,000 words unless the story truly needs more length. Identify your tropes (morally grey, vigilante, slow-burn) and genres (dark romance, contemporary romance suspense) early because they become an important part of how you position and market the book.

Phase 10: Formatting

Purpose	Prepare publication-ready files.
Detailed Tasks	- Format ebook, paperback, and hardcover. - Use software such as Vellum, Atticus, or InDesign. Using word is okay but my gosh the software that is available is really easy to use and it formats for you. - Order physical proofs and read them cover-to-cover. KDP offers cheaper proofs and they come in faster. It also helps with seeing how your cover looks. I would order a matte version and a gloss version to see what you like best.
Workflow Note	Treat something like Atticus as a final-stage formatting tool, after substantive editing, line editing, copy editing, and proofreading are complete. Avoid formatting too early when major manuscript changes are still likely.

Phase 11: ARC Readers

Timing	At least...2–3 months before release. If you can get ARC's much sooner, then definitely do it.
Detailed Tasks	• Recruit 25–100 Advanced Reader Copy readers (ARC's). The more the better because they can leave goodreads reviews for you. • Distribute ARCs with review deadlines and links. I would do ebooks using BookFunnel. Mailing out paperbacks is costly. That, and you will likely find errors that need to be corrected before go live. You can send them an updated version for free. • Encourage honest reviews at launch. • Start finding ARC readers early so you are not scrambling close to release. • Vet ARC applicants when possible to make sure they are real readers who are genuinely interested in your genre and story. If they don't typically read your genre, don't offer them an ARC. If they have more of a marketing social media profile, don't send them a copy. Some companies are stealing work from authors to host on sites. Be careful. Look into their socials to see who they really are. • Protect ARC files with a visible ARC watermark or individualized watermarking. BookFunnel can help distribute and protect digital ARC copies.

Phase 12: Upload & Preorder

Purpose	Prepare retailer listings.
Detailed Tasks	• Upload final files. • Complete metadata, categories, keywords, pricing, book description, author bio, and Amazon A+ Content.

	• Enable preorders when possible.
Preorder Lesson	Use preorders when the retailer and your launch plan allow them. A preorder window gives you time to build awareness, collect interest, and direct readers to a live purchase page before release day. I would definitely begin building this momentum 6-8 months before launch.

Phase 13: Marketing

Purpose	Build awareness before and after launch.
Detailed Tasks	• Continue marketing before release and after publication. We are our own agents and marketers. • Post consistently on Instagram; daily posting can help build familiarity, community, and a following over time. • Be authentically you. Readers respond to the author behind the book, not just polished promotional graphics. • Support other indie authors and participate genuinely in the community. Those relationships often become an important source of mutual encouragement and visibility. You will see some of the ugly side of social media too. There are some pretty harsh and harassing accounts that make you question the world. You have to be able to push them aside and show them grace. Don't publicly argue with anyone on socials. It's better to meet them with kindness even when they show you none. • Consider avoiding generative-AI-created marketing graphics as it could create confusion about how the book itself was written. Some readers and author communities react strongly to AI use, so keeping marketing visibly author-created can prevent unnecessary controversy.

	Become a Canva expert. Watch youtube videos. Canva will become your best friend.
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Marketing Timeline

Time	Marketing Focus
6 Months Before	Reveal title, build newsletter, grow social media, share writing journey.
4 Months Before	Cover reveal, tropes, character teasers, quotes, mood boards.
3 Months Before	Open ARC applications, contact influencers, bookstores, podcasts, and apply for festivals.
2 Months Before	Share early reviews, behind-the-scenes content, countdown graphics, order swag.
1 Month Before	Daily content, live videos, giveaways, preorder push, media outreach.
Launch Week	Launch party, celebrate reviews, share reader photos, encourage reviews, bookstore events.
After Launch	Seasonal promotions, podcasts, newsletters, book clubs, conventions, libraries, ads, continue for at least one year.

Author Marketing Checklist

- Website and newsletter (You can buy a domain from Canva for like \$20 and then create a website or wordpress.com)
- Instagram, Facebook, TikTok (I recommend IG and TikTok for sure)
- Goodreads & BookBub author profiles (Don't even bother. These are reader spaces. Also NEVER respond to a review. NEVER EVER.)
- Linktree – Add all of your social media and profiles in one Linktree
- Character graphics and quote cards (use Canva or pay an illustrator on Fiverr or Etsy to create your material)
- Mood boards and reels (yes, you have to create content to get people to be interested in your book)
- Bookmarks, stickers, banners – Canva is a great place for all of this. The quality is amazing.
- Reach out to bookstores, libraries, bloggers, Bookstagrammers, BookTok creators, podcasts, and sign up for author signings at bookish events. It will cost you to have a table so prepare for those expenses. Prices range from \$40-\$500, depending on the event. Take copies of your printed books to local bookstores and agree to consignment. It's usually 60% (author) 40% (retailer).
- Continue collecting reviews throughout the life of the book

Practical Budget & Launch Lessons

A few realities that are easy to underestimate on a first indie release:

- Start a publishing fund early. Editing software, formatting tools, proofs, author copies, marketing, event displays, and swag add up quickly.
- Calculate print economics before committing to extras. Page count, trim size, color, binding, and specialty finishes all affect unit cost and profit margin.
- Do not feel pressured to launch a deluxe edition immediately. Build readership, sales, and reviews first, then decide whether a special edition has enough demand to justify the investment.
- Build your marketing language while you write: genre, tropes, emotional promise, hooks, and ideal reader should not be an afterthought.
- Protect your advance copies thoughtfully, but focus on finding genuine readers and making the ARC experience easy and professional.