

Practical Book Design for Self-Published Authors

Covers, Formatting, and Readability
Without Expensive Tools

What This Booklet Covers

- Simple principles of effective cover design
- Choosing readable and appropriate fonts
- Common formatting mistakes and how to avoid them
- Basic interior formatting using Word or OpenOffice
- Practical readability improvements for print books
- Free and low-cost tools for self-published authors

Presented by Justin M. Davis

Why Presentation Matters

Most readers will form an opinion about a book within seconds of seeing it. Before they read the first sentence, they have already begun judging the cover, typography, spacing, and overall presentation. While strong writing is always the foundation of a good book, thoughtful design helps remove distractions and creates a smoother reading experience.

This booklet focuses on practical and affordable ways self-published authors can improve both cover design and interior formatting without needing expensive software or advanced publishing knowledge. The goal is not to imitate large publishing houses perfectly, but to understand why certain design choices are commonly used and how they can improve readability, professionalism, and reader comfort.

Many formatting and design conventions exist for practical reasons. Clear typography reduces reader fatigue. Proper spacing improves readability. Simple cover design helps titles remain readable at thumbnail size. These small choices may seem minor individually, but together they shape how a reader experiences a book.

Good formatting is often invisible to the reader. When typography, spacing, and layout are handled well, the reader stops noticing the design and becomes immersed in the story itself. Poor formatting, however, can create constant friction through cramped text, inconsistent spacing, difficult typography, or distracting layouts that make reading feel tiring or unpolished.

Self-publishing has made it easier than ever for authors to share their work, but it has also placed more responsibility on authors to understand the presentation side of publishing. Fortunately, creating a clean and readable book does not require expensive software or years of design experience. A handful of simple improvements can dramatically improve how professional and comfortable a book feels to readers.

The good news is that most improvements are simple, inexpensive, and easy to learn. With tools such as Microsoft Word, OpenOffice, Canva, and Google Fonts, authors can create books that look clean, professional, and inviting to readers.

Example Fonts and Sizes

Example 1

Today I ate a biscuit. It was, truthfully, not the most impressive of biscuits. The crust, while flaky, was somewhat bland and unimpressive.

Example 2

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Cover Design

A cover's primary job is not to tell the entire story—it is to attract attention, communicate tone, and encourage the reader to learn more. Since many readers first encounter a book as a small online thumbnail, clarity and readability are often more important than excessive detail.

Keep it Simple

Overly busy covers can become visually overwhelming and difficult to read at smaller sizes. A clear focal point and readable typography are usually more effective than excessive imagery or effects.

Make the Title Readable

The title should remain easy to read even as a thumbnail. Strong contrast between the text and background helps improve visibility and readability.

Typography Matters

Fonts communicate mood and genre. Decorative fonts may work for titles, but they should still remain readable. In most cases, one or two fonts are enough for an effective cover design.

Think About Genre

Color, typography, and imagery all help signal what kind of story the reader can expect. Readers often recognize genre expectations before reading the synopsis.

Effective cover design is often clear, readable, and easy to recognize even at small sizes. The following examples demonstrate how typography, contrast, and layout can affect readability and visual impact.



Author Name Placement

Established authors often place their name prominently at the top of the cover because readers recognize the author immediately. For newer authors, the title is usually more important since readers are discovering the book for the first time.

This is especially important on bookstore or convention display racks where the lower portion of the cover may be partially hidden behind other books. Placing the title too low can make it difficult for readers to quickly identify or remember the book.

Interior Formatting

Interior formatting shapes the reading experience long after the cover has attracted the reader's attention. Good formatting helps the reader focus on the story itself, while poor formatting can create unnecessary fatigue and distraction.

Readability Comes First

A book should feel comfortable to read for long periods of time. Extremely small fonts, cramped margins, or excessive spacing can make reading feel tiring even when the writing itself is strong.

Use Consistent Formatting

Consistency helps a book feel polished and professional. Body text, chapter titles, spacing, and margins should remain consistent throughout the entire book.

Justified Text

Most printed fiction uses justified text because it creates a cleaner and more uniform reading flow. Left-aligned text is common for websites and documents, but justified text is often more comfortable for long-form print reading.

Chapter Breaks Matter

Starting new chapters on a fresh page helps signal progression and gives the reader a natural pause between sections. Even simple chapter pages can make a book feel significantly more polished and easier to navigate.

Simple Formatting Is Enough

Professional formatting does not require expensive software or advanced typography knowledge. Clean margins, readable fonts, proper spacing, and consistent layout choices already improve readability dramatically.

Chapter 1

The First Bite

Today I ate a biscuit. It was, truthfully, not the most impressive of biscuits. The crust, while flaky, was somewhat bland and unimpressive. Arguably, there was a subtle hint of buttery flavor, though it was so minute as to barely be worth mentioning. Still, a biscuit that promises nothing is at least honest, and there is a kind of comfort in honesty, even when that honesty admits to mediocrity.

I examined it before that first bite, turning it slightly in my hand. The light from the kitchen window fell across its surface, revealing the faint irregularities in its shape---the small cracks where the dough had stretched and split, the uneven browning along the top where the oven's heat had played favorites. At certain angles, it was matte and pale; at others, the faintest glint of golden crust appeared, as though the biscuit were trying, without much confidence, to pass itself off as something better. My thumb traced the higher ridges, their faint warmth giving the shadows shape. There was no artistry in it, but something about its unpolished simplicity held a quiet appeal.

I held it longer than was necessary, letting my thumb trace the edge where the top met the side. The surface was cool now, no trace of the oven's warmth, but I could still feel the faint powdery residue of flour---stubborn, clinging, almost chalk-like. It reminded me this was not a biscuit from a package or a bakery display, smoothed to perfection. This was a biscuit with a history, brief and inelegant as it was, and here I stood at its culmination. Even the air seemed stiller, as though the moment before the first bite required a hush of its own---broken only by the quiet shift of my breath, a reminder that time had not stopped, only slowed.

Simple Tools for Better Book Design

Creating a clean and professional-looking book does not require expensive software or advanced publishing experience. Many important improvements can be made using free or inexpensive tools that are easy to learn.

Canva

Canva is a beginner-friendly design tool commonly used for creating book covers, promotional graphics, and social media images. It provides templates, typography tools, and simple drag-and-drop design features that make cover creation more approachable for new authors.

Microsoft Word and OpenOffice

Both Microsoft Word and OpenOffice can handle basic interior formatting for most novels and novellas. Features such as justified text, page breaks, margins, headers, footers, and paragraph spacing are usually enough to create a clean and readable print interior.

Google Fonts

Google Fonts provides a large collection of free fonts that can be used commercially under the Open Font License. This makes it easier for self-published authors to safely experiment with different typography styles for both covers and interiors.

Keep It Practical

The goal of formatting is not perfection—it is readability, consistency, and a comfortable reading experience. Simple improvements applied consistently often matter far more than advanced formatting techniques.

A Simple Starting Workflow

1. Write and Edit the Manuscript

Focus on the story first before worrying about formatting details.

2. Format the Interior

Using Word or OpenOffice:

- Set page size and margins
- Choose a readable font
- Use justified body text
- Add page breaks between chapters
- Create simple headers and page numbers

3. Design the Cover

Using Canva or similar tools:

- Keep the layout simple
- Make the title readable
- Ensure the cover works at thumbnail size
- Use only one or two fonts

4. Export and Review

Export the final manuscript as a PDF and carefully review it before printing or uploading. Always order or inspect proof copies whenever possible.

Recommended Starting Fonts

- | Interior Fonts | Cover Fonts |
|----------------|--------------------|
| • EB Garamond | • Oswald |
| • Libre | • Montserrat |
| • Baskerville | • Playfair Display |
| • Crimson Pro | • CINZEL |
| • Merriweather | |

Small improvements in presentation can make a lasting difference in the reader's experience.

Final Review and Proofing

Before uploading or printing a book, always review the final formatted version carefully. Formatting issues that are easy to miss on-screen often become much more noticeable once printed.

Review the Exported PDF

Always inspect the final PDF rather than relying only on the original document file.

Check for:

- incorrect page breaks
- inconsistent spacing
- missing page numbers
- formatting shifts
- image placement issues

Print Sample Pages

Reading a few printed pages can quickly reveal problems with font size, margins, spacing, or readability that may not be obvious on a monitor.

Order Proof Copies

Print-on-demand services occasionally produce printing errors such as missing pages, duplicated sections, or incorrect trimming. Reviewing proof copies helps catch problems before the book reaches readers.

Take Breaks Before Reviewing

After spending long periods formatting a book, it becomes easy to overlook mistakes. Reviewing the book again after a short break often makes errors easier to notice.

Pre-Publication Checklist

Before publishing or printing:

- Title remains readable at thumbnail size
- Cover text is easy to read
- Fonts remain consistent throughout
- Body text is justified and readable
- Margins feel comfortable
- Chapter breaks are clear
- Headers and page numbers are correct
- Exported PDF matches expectations
- Sample pages have been printed
- Proof copy has been reviewed carefully

A Note on Headers and Footers

Many self-published books use simple centered page numbers, which is perfectly acceptable for most projects. Traditionally published books often use mirrored headers instead, with the page number placed on the outer corner of each page alongside the author name or book title.

Beyond appearance, this layout can also help with print quality control. Since print-on-demand services occasionally produce duplicated, missing, or incorrectly inserted pages, mirrored headers make it easier to quickly scan proof copies and identify problems before books reach readers.

Example Header

Left Page

4 — JUSTIN M. DAVIS

Right Page

TODAY I ATE A BISCUIT — 5

Practical Book Design for Self-Published Authors

Good presentation does not replace good writing, but thoughtful design helps readers engage with the story without unnecessary distraction or fatigue.

Professional-looking books are often built from simple, consistent, and reader-friendly choices.

Presented for the Local Writing Group
by Justin M. Davis

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