

## **Print on Demand**

I realise now that I was tempting fate.

My book *Writing for Blockheads* is a contemporary guide for amateur writers, but it also draws on forty years of experience, and charts how the process of publication has been transformed.

Back in 1975, when I finally had my first book accepted by a reputable publisher, they were worried that at 250 pages it might be too expensive - £2.00. If I could cut it down to 150 pages, they could sell it for £1.50. I cut it down, but they took their time, and when it finally emerged two years later it cost £2.85. Escalating printing costs had wiped out any savings made by reducing its length.

In 2001 when I self-published my novel, I had a thousand copies printed, because getting five hundred done cost only slightly less. Now, of course, you can get a hundred done, and reprint immediately if you need more. You send off the files and in a fortnight you get the proofs, and within another fortnight the copies arrive at your front door. The brave new world of self-publication, I thought, was easy, quick and cheap. Oh yes, I should have known.

Now there are tons of firms who will publish your book, and it's wise to google comparisons and reviews before deciding who you're going to use. But with *Writing for Blockheads* I didn't need to do that. I had a firm I'd used three times already, who for the purposes of this article I'll call Print on Demand, POD for short. They'd been fine – prompt, efficient and reasonably priced.

Unfortunately, there's a cost to that success. Other people's experience must have been the same as mine, because since my last use of them POD has grown. They have acquired an extra layer of management, an accounts officer who moves smoothly between the customer and the people doing the actual work. Or at least, that's the theory. For this article, to save embarrassment, I'll call him Martin. In the old days, if you rang them you got straight through to someone who was working on your files. Not any more.

I sent off my pdf files, as requested, on February 11. I'd had some computer problems which had caused a delay, but on past experience was sure I'd meet my deadline – a book launch on March 27. Two weeks later, I'd heard nothing, so I e-mailed Martin:

PAUL: As I understand it, you received the *Writing for Blockheads* files from me a fortnight ago, but when I look at my account details it says “awaiting files.” Is there some kind of problem?

MARTIN: I emailed you a couple of times saying that we had a problem with opening the files and requested new ones. I assume you did not receive the emails?

I hadn't, and my computer had been gobbling up e-mails which never got through. That's not Martin's fault, but I had warned him on February 11 that that was happening, and given my phone number if he had any reason to suspect e-mails hadn't got through. I was worried that time was now short, and that I'd miss the deadline. I offered to send the original Word files, but Martin wanted a new pdf..

MARTIN: If you could convert to PDF that would be helpful. We will meet your deadline.

Two weeks later I'd heard nothing, so I e-mailed again. He replied that he'd chase it up, and next day he assured me:

MARTIN: Your proof is in production and should be leaving us no later than the end of this week.

Five days later I'd had nothing, and was starting to worry. I had press releases out, and coverage on Facebook and Twitter. I wanted copies in local bookshops the day before the launch on March 27. On March 17 I got this:

MARTIN: If I remember correctly we were creating the cover for this for you and making an amendment on page 35 which I have just been informed can only be done in the original Word file.

I'd previously offered him Word copies, but he'd turned them down. I'd sent pdf copies for previous jobs, but this hadn't ruled out the chance of making amendments. If it did, there'd be no point in sending proof copies; they'd simply print copies of whatever I sent them. But on previous jobs they'd been able to carry out minor tweaking of the cover without problem or delay. But the scariest bit is the innocence with which Martin says “I have just been informed...” about the relative qualities of pdf and Word. Is this the first time this issue has come up?

Meanwhile, I'm worried about the launch, so I decide that I need faster, more direct contact. I ring up the firm, talk to various secretaries, and finally get hold of Martin:

PAUL: Does your assurance that I will meet my deadline still apply?

MARTIN: Tell me again, when is your launch?

PAUL: March 27. If you get to the point when you know that you can't get the books here in time, I need to know that straight away.

MARTIN: Of course. We'll let you know if that happens. Rather than using first-class post, we'll send the proof by recorded delivery, if you can make sure there's someone there to receive it.

PAUL: There will be.

MARTIN: Fine. In the meantime, do please ring me if you have any concerns.

This was Tuesday morning. He assured me that the proof might possibly get here the same day, probably on the Wednesday, but certainly by 10 am Thursday. On Thursday, 19 March, the 10 am deadline arrives, with no sign of a proof I rang Print on Demand. They said Martin was involved in another call, but that he would ring me back. He didn't ring, but replied by e-mail:

MARTIN: The proof did not go yesterday as I would have hoped and I was not aware of this until this morning. It will be with you tomorrow pre-10.

The proof copy finally arrived at 10.50 on Friday morning, exactly a week before the launch, and more than five weeks after the files were first sent. The preliminary pages – title page, copyright, contents – were missing. It didn't take long to work out why. He'd asked for Word files so that he could amend the cover and make a change in the text. I'd sent the Word files for the cover and the text, because they didn't need to alter the preliminary pages. Somebody assumes that these two files are all there is, so the preliminary pages get left out.

It's the week of my launch, but I refuse to give up hope. At a squeeze, they can do proof to copies in five days, so maybe they'll bust a gut to get copies to me for 27 March. Come the day, there aren't any copies. But I do get an e-mail, which provokes the following exchange.

MARTIN: My pre-press guy has just informed me that altering or amending a PDF is extremely time consuming and expensive. Would you be able to provide the Word document?

PAUL: I sent you these amendments a week ago. I can't believe that this has only just occurred to you. You've already had the Word documents. But here they are again. I take it there won't be any copies here for tonight's launch, but it would have been good to be told in advance, as we'd agreed.

MARTIN: I am so sorry about this Paul. I only realised this morning that this was the case.

Briefly, there's a flash of personal remorse, a sense that things could have been done better. There's also that worrying innocence again, as though this is the first time he's ever been involved in this stuff – "My pre-press guy has just informed me...."

Meanwhile, what happened to the launch? It was to be held at Wenlock Books, which was the UK's independent bookshop of the year in 2007, and has always been brilliant. Anna Dreda, its proprietor, is a longtime friend who'd provided a quote on the back cover. She was also due to be going on holiday next day, after which she'd be consumed in the maelstrom of Wenlock Poetry Festival. So we agreed that the launch should go ahead, whether or not the books had actually arrived.

It worked superbly. People came, I read extracts from the text, they got a good sense of what the book was like, and promised to buy it when copies became available. We had to find a way of explaining the delay, and settled on a dialogue, based on my e-mail and phone exchanges with Martin, where I read my lines and a disembodied computer-based voice recited his. It worked like a dream. Unbelievable, entertaining and a clear explanation for the delay.

I still had to chase up POD, and here I made a big mistake. Now that the urgent deadline of the launch was passed, my next priority was the Wenlock Poetry Festival, where I was due to perform alongside Michael Rosen. A lot of literary visitors would be in town, browsing through Wenlock books. But that was a month away, so like a fool I contacted Martin to say

PAUL: Since the copies aren't going to get here in time, it's more important that they be right rather than rushed. Just to make everything clear I've put all the necessary changes in a

revised Corrections sheet – attached. If there's anything there that needs to be discussed, please contact me immediately.

Two weeks later, on April 10, I'd heard nothing. Maybe it was time for a change of tactic. Neither phone nor email, pleas nor guilt, seemed to have spurred Martin into action, so maybe I move up the chain of command. POD's website insists that the Managing Director is "hands on" so I write to him, detailing the story so far, enclosing the dialogue performed at the lunch, and suggesting that this isn't good for his firm's reputation

Coincidentally, next day I get a second proof, which I wasn't expecting. There are two minor corrections needed to the cover (centring of author's name, insertion of ISBN barcode) which had been at the top of my list of corrections on March 28, but still had not been addressed. I filled in the response form immediately, and sent it back by first-class post.

By the end of the week, April 17, my letter to the MD seems to have had some effect. I get an anxious phone-call from the Martin, surprised and maybe hurt that I had written to his managing director, who had clearly instructed him to check on all the details of the story and then report back. This was the only time that Martin has initiated a phone call to me.

MARTIN: You said that getting it right was more important than getting it straight away, so I organised a second proof, but you haven't replied.

PAUL: Yes I did. I sent it back the same day. Two items at the top of my list of corrections hadn't been altered at all.

MARTIN: When was that?

PAUL: Monday of this week. April 13.

MARTIN: But it should have been sent a lot earlier than that.

PAUL: That's when I got it. If I'd had it last week I wouldn't have written to your managing director saying that nothing had happened.

MARTIN: You sent it on Monday? Ah. It might be here at the office, because I've been at a book fair for three days. I'll need to check.

PAUL: I'd heard nothing for a fortnight. If you'd sent me an e-mail saying the second proof was on the way, then I wouldn't have written that letter.

MARTIN: I don't like to do that. On any one day I may be dealing with a hundred accounts. I can't be sending e-mails about all of them.

He's in a little bubble of his own, polishing the way he likes to do the job. Which is fine, except that he has an angry customer out here, who he admits he has already let down. You would think that might prompt him to make an exception and adjust his approach. But no. The Wenlock Poetry Festival comes and goes, I read with Michael Rosen, hundreds of people stream through Wenlock books and my book is nowhere to be seen.

On the following Monday I ring Martin:

PAUL: Can I speak to Peter Aitken, please?

MARTIN: Speaking.

PAUL: It's Paul Francis, calling about *Writing for Blockheads*.

MARTIN: How are you, Paul?

PAUL: Furious, frankly. On February 26 you promised me I'd have books for the launch on March 27. It's now April 27 and they still haven't arrived.

MARTIN: But when you returned the proofs you asked for a design change.

PAUL: That was two weeks ago. Does it take two weeks to centre a name and put on a bar code?

MARTIN: Ah, but I was away for three days.

PAUL: That's not my fault. I'm going to a writer's fair on Wednesday night. Will I have any books for then?

MARTIN: I'll try to get you some, and if I can't I'll let you know.

This is what he said before the launch, but he didn't, and he didn't. He grandly refers to "a design change" as though I'd dithered about what I wanted and then made an unreasonable request at the last minute. What I wanted was for them to centre the author's name on the cover, and to insert an ISBN bar code. I'd made both those requests explicitly from the start (February 11), and repeated them in my list corrections on March 28. They were both requests which the same firm had met with no trouble on two previous occasions when I'd used them.

And on it goes. What I'd thought was a blistering letter to the Managing Director on April 10 sank without trace, acknowledgement or reply. I wrote to him again on May 1, detailing the promotional opportunities I had missed, and pointing out that they also

represented sustained bad publicity for his firm, as I kept having to explain to potential readers why copies weren't available. Many of those readers are also writers, who might think of using his services. I concluded:

“Despite the wasted opportunities, I still need to receive copies of my book. I am not sure what else I can do to expedite the completion of this work, which is why I wrote to you in the first place. I look forward to your reply.”

I have still received no response to either of my letters. I rang again last week, to hear that Martin is away on holiday. Then I received a third proof, which I hadn't asked for, but is fine. I sent it back by first-class return post. Their standard line is that printing will be completed within ten working days. Those days have now gone, but I still don't have any copies of my book. Any day now? Don't hold your breath

If you'd told me in 1975 that I could send off files on February 11 and have books by the end of May, I'd have been delighted. As it is, spoilt by past experience, I have been expecting these books to arrive “any day now” for two solid months, between March 23 and May 25.

It's been emotionally wearing, and it's also sabotaged my launch plans. I had an interview in Radio Shropshire, which went ahead – very successfully – in March. The Shropshire Star didn't want to write anything – reasonably enough – until they had a copy, which turned out to be May. What I wanted to do was to go into bookshops saying “Look, launch coming up, this on Radio Shropshire, that in the Shropshire Star...how about it?” As it is, it's been stop start all the way through. This week, just as I should have been putting the whole ordeal behind me, I go into a local bookshop, where the owner tries to scan the barcode, which took so long to put on. It won't work. She tries three different readers, but gets no result with any of them. I don't know what the actual end to this story will be, but something tells me it's going to be bad.