

What is Publishing?

by Claire Kilroy

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If you love to read, and aren't pursuing a childhood dream to become a food stylist or helicopter pilot, chances are you've at least considered going into publishing. It's the go-to profession for book lovers – but what does a job in publishing really involve?

Publishing refers to any process through which information is disseminated to the public, which is why you'll come across the word in connection to anything from magazines to music to mobile games. However, this post focuses on the sprawling, competitive, and flourishing world of book publishing.

The What

Publishing is all about getting a book from point A – an author's laptop – to point B – shelves, first in a book shop and then in someone's home. But beyond that, it's incredibly varied; each publishing house or division will have a slightly different mission.

First of all, there are different sectors even within the world of book publishing, the main ones being trade publishing, and educational and academic publishing. There's also Science, Technology, and Medicine (STM), whose publications are aimed at professionals and experts in those fields, and are therefore pretty niche.

Trade is the kind of publishing people are generally most familiar with – these are the books that are widely read, make the bestseller lists, and fill the shelves of bookshops. Academic and educational publishers produce textbooks and materials for students and teachers across all ages and stages.

There are ever further subdivisions. The big publishing houses often have several different 'imprints'. These are the trade names a book will be published under, but also basically equate to the department that the book was published through. Each imprint will have a different mission regarding the kind of books it wants to work on – they're generally differentiated by the target age group and genre of the books, and whether they're fiction or non-fiction.

When you're looking at a publishing job, you always need to be aware what sector it's in, and what kind of books you'll be working on. And though most people want to go into trade publishing, particularly adult fiction, don't limit yourself without considering all your options. Academic publishing can be really interesting – and jobs in that sector tend to be less competitive.

The Who

Publishing needs people with all kinds of skill sets. The industry involves work in a variety of fields, so there are plenty of career paths you can take.

Editorial: When most people think publishing, they think editorial. It's by far the most popular – and competitive – field amongst eager graduates vying for a job. Editorial tasks range from selecting manuscripts and making a case for their publication, to making suggestions and correcting errors, to liaising with other departments and informing them about the book. When you start out, a lot of your work will likely involve administrative tasks, but the higher you rise, the more you'll actually work with the manuscripts and

authors. Editors generally need to prove they have great communications and organisational skills, and be very attentive to detail.

Marketing & Publicity: Depending the size of the publishing house you join, these departments may be separate or combined. Both involve getting people talking about, and hopefully buying, a book. Publicity will typically encompass promoting the book on social media platforms, securing author interviews and reviews, and organising events, while marketing involves designing advertising campaigns, and creating promotional posters and material, amongst other things. Creativity is really important, as are strong writing and research skills – you need to understand the book, the author, and the target audience to create a strong campaign.

Design: Designers are central to getting the book to our shelves, as they're in charge of everything to do with how the book looks. For all we're told not to judge a proverbial book by its cover, when it comes to the real thing we almost all do. Unsurprisingly, creative and artistic souls are the right fit for this department, but solid digital skills are essential, as much of this work will be done on computers.

Production: The production department is where the work of the editorial and design team is combined, and the actual book is created. Organisation and time management top the list of qualities required, as this team needs to line up all the elements necessary for production and keep to a tight schedule. Interpersonal skills are also important, as you'll be dealing with all sorts of people.

Sales: salesmen might not have the best rep, but this field isn't just about meeting quotas. The ultimate goal is to get booksellers to buy the books in question, but what sales is really about is building those relationships, and communicating why the book is a good choice. Plus, some big publishers have international sales divisions, which could see you travelling around the world with your pitch. Sales roles are best suited to warm, energetic, and confident people, who are happy to talk books all day long.

Rights: If you're go into this department, you'll be involved in selling rights to books or extracts from them – to newspapers, to TV or film companies, to foreign publishers, and more. If you want to go into international rights, good language skills and cultural awareness will come in handy, while an interest in the media will serve you well if selling to those companies. And whatever role you go for, you'll need good negotiation, communication, and numeracy skills.

The How

Given the range of jobs available, there's no one magic formula that can make you perfect for publishing. Many hopefuls, especially heading into editorial, will have studied English, or other Arts and Humanities degrees, but it's not essential.

As for completing a Masters in Publishing, it can boost your chances of getting into the industry – especially as it will help you network and meet contacts – but again isn't considered a requirement. Some Masters courses will also deliberately give you an understanding of every department and stage of publication, which will boost your understanding of the whole process, and help you figure out what's right for you.

However, what is definitely essential is getting some work experience under your belt. Publishing is incredibly competitive, and entry-level jobs will only go to people who've already managed to get a toe in the door by completing work experience and internships.

Most of the big publishing houses run some kind of organised work experience scheme, often lasting a couple of weeks, and some also offer summer internships on a regular basis or others at random times throughout the year.

Remember as well that some fields within the industry are less competitive than others; it's worth applying to a variety of departments, because you might find it's actually the right place for you, even if you hadn't previously considered it. And although there's no guarantees, you may find it easier to change departments once you're on the inside

Finally, you'll find that networking is key to getting into publishing and advancing. Of course it's helpful if your aunt/neighbour/friend works in publishing, but you can go out and make connections yourself. There are loads of industry events that you can attend even if you haven't had your break yet.