

VOLUME
30.1
SUMMER 2022

Between Keys



A publication of the JALT Materials Writers Special Interest Group

The Materials Writers SIG was established for the purpose of helping members to turn fresh teaching ideas into useful classroom materials. We try to be a mutual assistance network, offering information regarding copyright law, sharing practical advice on publishing practices, including self-publication, and suggesting ways to create better language learning materials for general consumption or for individual classroom use.

WWW.MATERIALSWRITERS.ORG



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From the Publication Chair

Joel Neff

Dear Readers,

This issue, *Between the Keys* is looking back at two presentations we hosted last fall at the JALT 2021 conference.

In “Musings on Marketing,” Sean Anderson walks us through ten lessons he has learned as he has grown his language learning manga, “Crystal Hunters” from a simple idea into a regularly published venture.

Then, in a somewhat similar vein, R. Gregg McNabb explains some considerations and some pitfalls involved in self-publishing.

Finally, we close with a call for submissions. The MW SIG coordinating team would love to see what you have been up to in your classrooms and in your research projects. We are looking for a variety of articles to publish, including research articles, reviews, and even columns. We are accepting pitches at publications@materialswriters.org.

We are looking forward to hearing from you,

Joel Neff
Publication Chair
July, 2022

Musings on Marketing

By Sean Anderson

Every entrepreneur has their own unique experience when marketing. My team and I, the creators of the language learning manga *Crystal Hunters*, are no exception. Now that our books are regular #1 sellers on Amazon, here are ten things I've learned during our self-publishing journey that I'd like to pass on to amateurs entering the self-publishing space.



1. Figure out who your audience is and how to reach them

Sure, you want to make or have a product. But, who is it for? Can you reach them (1) by communicating with your audience yourself; (2) without going through a paid middleman, paid company, or paid organization; and (3) without relying on your “friends” on or off social media?

My team and I use social media, but we don't pay for ads anymore. We enter language learning groups (e.g. on Facebook) where our target customers are, get to know them by helping them learn, and then share information about our product if the opportunity arises. It takes a lot of time, but it has been effective.

2. Make sure your product works in two or more languages

One country may not like your product, but another country might. When we started *Crystal Hunters*, we launched it in English for Japan, and the reception was mediocre. However, when we launched it in Japanese for the rest of the world, our sales increased. If you can, make sure your product can be adapted for other languages easily.

3. The creator makes the final decision

We had to part company with a hire because they kept putting their own ideas into our work and wouldn't remove them. All people you hire need to understand that they are free to share and demonstrate their ideas. But you, the creator, have the final say on how the product will be. Even for a non-hire team, it is a smart idea to give the final say on each key area to someone so you don't get locked in debate and never finish.

4. Keep the relationships with your hires professionally distant

We had two hires leave us before we gathered the amazing team we have now. We made the mistake of becoming too friendly with these hires while they were working for us. When they quit

it was emotionally as well as financially devastating. If a hire leaves because of irreconcilable differences, it's going to hurt a lot more if you're close to them than if you aren't. Make friends with them when the work is done and they don't have a job you are paying them to do.

5. Don't buy social media ads

Don't buy social media ads until you can afford them with your profits. You're free to think and act differently, but ads on Facebook and Twitter were a big waste of money for us, even with their customization options. Likes are not sales. Let me repeat that. Likes are **not** sales. Don't learn the hard way by spending a bunch of money on social media ads and being disappointed. We won't pay for social media ads again until our sales can pay for someone else to do them for us. For now, we're happy doing #1 on this list.

6. Beware of amateur marketers

When you start having some success (or even before), amateur marketers will start to approach you with their ideas to increase visibility and engagement for your product. Politely tell them to



leave you be. It'll be easy to identify them because they won't have done one satisfying bit of research on your product before approaching you. And, when you ask them to do research on your product before deciding to hire them, they'll start complaining about spending time learning about your product for free, something they should have already done.

If you **do** hire an amateur marketer, be 100% satisfied with the knowledge they have about your product before hiring them. Those marketers may be fans and just might be worth your time.

7. Learn to do as much as you can by yourself

My team and I handle all our story, art, marketing (e.g. website, Amazon listings), etc. We took the time to learn how to do these things and now we are almost completely self-contained. If we need something fixed, we almost never have to call or wait on someone. We can fix the problem ourselves swiftly. There is nothing worse than when you find a problem during a book launch and have to wait a week or more for someone else to fix it.

8. Give something away for free

When you start self-publishing, you are often a nobody. Therefore, if you want your product to spread, it's best to give your first product, or something heavily connected to it, away for free. And do it in a way that is a bit uncomfortable for the person who accesses the free item. For example, we have our first book online for free, but the sequel books are only on Kindle. Most people end up buying our first book on Kindle to have them all in one place and readable offline instead of having to stay online and jump between locations. We also have a lot of free study guides for people to use.

This is a personal preference, but my team and I don't ask for people's email addresses in exchange for our free materials. A lot of people think getting email addresses for free materials helps you get serious customers, but we've found it prevents us from spreading among more casual website visitors, especially in this day and age where people are more reluctant to share their personal information.

9. Read these books before starting

There are two books I've found invaluable in my entrepreneurial self-publishing journey. If you're thinking about producing a product, but are unsure, read Hugh Macleod's: ***Ignore Everybody: and 39 Other Keys to Creativity***. It delivers edgy and humorous advice on maximizing creativity in a world that often discourages it.

If you're thinking about producing a product, or already have one ready to market, read Seth Godin's: ***This is Marketing***. This book is useful for insight into how, and why, people buy things or change their habits in any way.

Both of these books helped build my confidence so I could move forward as an entrepreneur and self-publisher.



10. Love your product

Finally, love your product. Why? Because none or few people will for quite some time, maybe even years. But if you love your product enough to do some or all of the nine things above, and make your product's quality equal to or better than your competitors' in all respects, you may see success.

So, there you have them, ten pieces of advice from one of the team behind Crystal Hunters, the #1 language learning manga on Amazon. I hope it helps you move forward on your self-publishing journey.

The Business Side of Self-publishing

R. Gregg McNabb

Shizuoka Institute of Science and Technology



There are various reasons to think about self-publishing instead of selling one's work to a publisher. Some include maintaining control over content and layout, having the ability to do a small print run, being able to develop and control a customized, complementary website, having the possibility to earn more income, and being able to publish something considered niche or "too new."

In my case, for a year, at home, I carefully wrote a reading skills textbook using *In Design* (online) that was intended for students worldwide. It has a fully integrated Moodle website for students and teachers and a detailed Teacher's Manual. At first I hadn't planned to self-publish, and approached a large, international publisher who expressed interest in the manuscript, but ultimately declined as its sales would have cannibalized sales of existing titles. Next I offered it to each of the three medium-sized domestic publishers who specialize in EFL materials. All were interested and offered a standard royalty of 4%, but would not offer more. In addition to being unsatisfied with their uniform offer, I felt that one publisher's proposed textbook size was too small and I wanted to use a different type of paper.

Since an international publisher and three domestic publishers had shown interest, and because I already had a number of different publishing experiences, including with two of the domestic publishers, I felt reasonably confident that I could successfully self-publish. I wanted to exercise control over content and layout and hoped to earn more income than would have been possible had I published with one of the popular domestic publishers (4% - 0.8% income tax = 3.2%). The reasons for my decision have proved sound as the layout and content are just as planned and I have earned considerably more than I would have had I sold the manuscript to one of them. It is in its second edition and third printing. While I have no regrets, I could have made changes (see

printer below) that would have made the process smoother and more profitable. I hope readers may be able to benefit from my experiences.

Requisite first steps

Having decided to self-publish, there were required procedures:

1. You need to decide whether to do the procedures to create an actual company or be self-employed. When a company is created, a company number is assigned and you must file a “blue” tax form. If you choose the self-employed option, you can choose to file the blue tax form or the regular one for individuals. There is no company number, although a publisher’s number will be assigned by the Japan ISBN Agency. For my situation, self-employed and electing to file the blue tax form were appropriate. I recently learned that a variety of customs clearance companies will only deal with companies that have an assigned company number, not individuals. This can make importing textbooks very troublesome and costly (see printer below).
2. You need a company *hanko*¹. I had one made along with a rubber address stamp. The cost was under ¥10,000.
3. At some point you will need to open a dedicated bank account. Bring your *hanko* and any paperwork such as the registration for your company (if you elect to self-publish that way).
4. You will need an International Standard Book Number (ISBN). I bought 10. You have to contact the Japan ISBN Agency in Tokyo. The cost was ¥21,600. An ISBN consists of 13 digits starting with 978-4- (978-4 - publisher's code - book title number - check digit) and is an international standard that identifies a book as having been published by a specific publisher in a particular country. You can make your own number.

These URLs may be helpful:

https://isbn.jpo.or.jp/index.php/fix_calc_isbn/

https://isbn.jpo.or.jp/index.php/fix_faq_answer/

https://www.dsri.jp/code/jan_publication/

https://isbn.jpo.or.jp/doc/after_acq.pdf

<https://isbn.jpo.or.jp/doc/08.pdf>

<https://isbn.jpo.or.jp/doc/08.pdf#page=20>

https://isbn.jpo.or.jp/index.php/fix_about_8/

¹ A *hanko* is a “name seal,” commonly used in Japan as a method of documenting transactions.

5. A Japanese Article Number (JAN-code) is also required. You must renew it every three years. Renewal costs ¥11,000*. If you like, you can find out more here: <https://jpo.or.jp/03-3267-2301> or 03-3518-9860. In order to sell your book (or anything for that matter) in a bookstore, it must have a JAN code.

**The price changes; this is the price as of publication.*

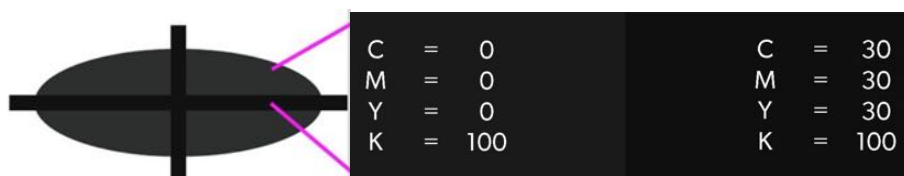
6. Once you receive the JAN code and have determined your isbn, you can generate the barcodes. To do this, google “generate ISBN barcode” and “generate JAN code barcode.”



Just some of the many documents you'll need as you register your book for posterity.

Choosing a printing company

Choosing a printer is the key decision. If you choose solely according to price in order to maximize your profit, let's hope that you are lucky. If you choose a major printer, make sure that they are going to have enough time for your bespoke textbook. Ideally, a reasonably nearby publisher with a good reputation who isn't afraid of dealing with or impatient with a small (foreign) client is best. In my case, I selected a medium-sized, reputable foreign publisher in Taiwan who offered English support and who patiently shared his expertise. At the time, the yen to New Taiwan dollar exchange rate was very favourable (however, not now) and partially influenced my decision. It has been a full-service experience and we have an actual relationship.



“Black” and “**Rich black**” (r) are distinct on a monitor, but *not* so on paper. Be aware of subtle shadings. Confirm ink saturation % with printer.

Whereas a printer who just wants to collect money for printing and assumes that you know what you are doing, good, experienced printers will advise you for free about many things unknown to a novice. For example, choosing the correct blacks and having the right ink saturation settings for the paper you intend to use or the settings that a particular printer prefers (due to equipment). If you plan to have many full-colour images, they might advise you to change your desired paper to one more suited to many color images (clay-based), which was what happened in my case. They might give you tips on how to improve image resolution, such as increasing the sharpness. A good printer will advise you to carefully check drop shadows to make sure they have rendered properly in the CMYK proofs you've received. An experienced printer can tell you right away whether your images are going to print well or not. A good printer will do a thorough flight check (a kind of final check on your pdf). Normally, this is the customer's responsibility. If you have a good relationship with your printer, you might be able to make some changes at the last minute. In my case, when I made the most recent edition which had many data updates, I just sent the changes (carefully and clearly explained) and they were inputted by staff for free and then checked. I didn't need to make and check a new manuscript. Bottom line: One way or another, a printer will affect your bottom line.

I had read that educational textbooks are not subject to duty. But that was misleading. In fact, I had not read extensively enough or I would have learned that textbooks do attract other duties and that the importer must pay the customs broker a fixed amount plus the broker's commission. Furthermore, if a customs inspection is carried out, the importer pays for that! Intuitively, one would expect that customs inspections should be free, being paid for out of our taxes. After all, customs inspectors are government employees. Unfortunately, that's not the case. In December 2021, I imported 1600 textbooks. The total cost of the printing and shipping door to door was a little over ¥810,000. The total cost for all customs related charges was around ¥125,000, which is not insignificant. The amount of time spent on writing polite Japanese e-mails regarding these procedures has also been fairly time consuming. When I asked the printer about this, he said that I am the only customer he has ever had who has had all of his shipments inspected. I have since learned from the customs broker the reason for this is not having a company number (above). Without one, apparently customs inspections are automatic. So working with a foreign printer was fine, but the importation process has serious drawbacks.

Treat it as a business

There is a lot of expertise baked into the international textbooks we buy. If you look inside a Cengage textbook, for example, you will see that scores of people seem to have been advisors. Did the publisher actually consult with all of those individuals? Indeed they did! An executive editor interviewed me for 20 minutes and took careful notes. For them, it is obviously big business, and other than the author and the publisher, many people from printers to various sales representatives to paper companies depend, in-part, on the sales of the *World English* series, as one example. If we can publish a good product, we can contribute to the local economy.

Be sure to write your book at home and on your own computer. If you are creating your textbook at your workplace, it is fair and legal that your employer is entitled to a share of the profits.

Consider the time spent making your textbook and other costs versus anticipated net income. If you want to tinker away at home and it is a labour of love, that is your choice, but if you're only going to make a few dollars, it might be preferable to play with your kids, write several journal articles, exercise more, or network in your field. Do you really want to spend hours and hours just for a few dollars? Determine how many copies you reasonably expect to sell, then put a fair value on your time.

Charge enough! The sales tax rate might increase. You might not negotiate as well with the university bookstore as you expected (the university bookstore - Maruzen, Kinokuniya, etc. takes its percentage, and it is not so small). If, like me, you reach the 3rd printing and do not want to change the ISBN, then your sale price has to take into account cost rises (paper, ink, labour, shipping, currency fluctuations, administrative matters, redoing a website, adding more activities and question bank choices, etc.). In fact, I would advise against printing abroad now.

There is already a plethora of good textbooks to choose from, so you may want to consider some or all of the following:

- How will you offer additional value? Yes, you do have to do that!
- Have you considered how busy part-time instructors will use your book?
- Have you *carefully* thought about: the language (e.g., Oxford 3,000), grammar, themes, recycling, progression, signposting, good balance and a variety of activities & projects, opportunities for enrichment, etc.? Where does your book fit in with other texts (media) that students will be using?
- Does it have an appealing design? Are there creative images and nice colours? Does it seem accessible? Is it really boilerplate or cluttered? Some domestic EFL publishers use a standard template and their books are sometimes sub-standard. Does the book look somewhat dull or might students have some pride of ownership? Is there enough space for their notes? When *you've* thumbed through other textbooks, be truthful, some were quickly dropped from consideration, weren't they? Remember that we judge (buy) according to appearance.
- If you're intending to publish a reading textbook, can it be read *properly* (like a book)? Layout does matter as reading is a physiological process. Cluttered, bad design can frustrate readers' ability to read correctly. It may even be detrimental to their learning!

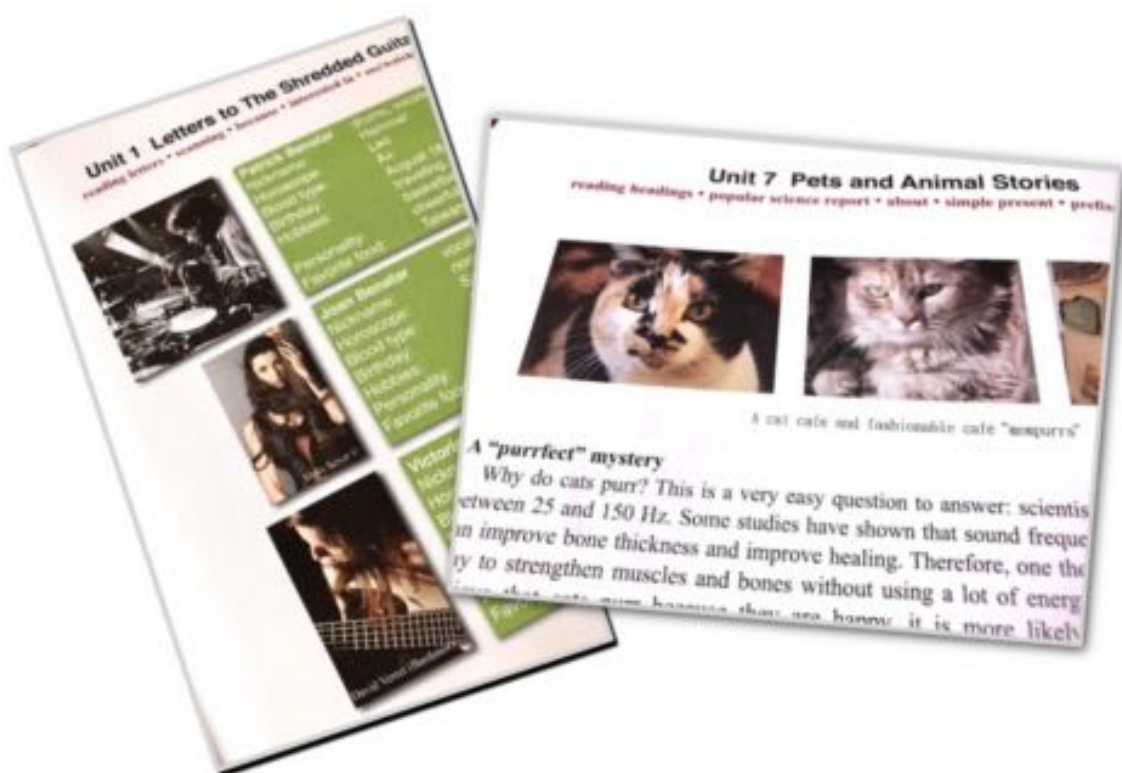
Store the books in a place with a stable temperature and humidity.

Personal biases may affect sales. If one is creating a textbook for a specific, narrow readership, then biases will be less of a concern. However if the goal is to sell many books and/or use it in

multiple sections of a common course, biases may matter. Japan is a fairly conservative country even among young people. Strongly left-leaning and/or issue-focused JALT members are in the minority overall in Japan and even in Japanese academia. Major publishers carefully vet their content to maximize sales and appeal to readers and educators. So in addition to sending your manuscript for proofreading, ask various people for their brutally honest opinions.

Conclusion

I'm glad that I treated self-publishing as a business, not as a piggy bank for little luxuries. As a result, I've earned considerably more than I would have, had I *worked for* a domestic publisher. Plus I've learned a lot about printing and various governmental regulations — sometimes in unexpected ways. While I've reluctantly had to pay some unanticipated charges, having set the initial sale price correctly has mitigated the discomfort somewhat. I've truly enjoyed doing my own layout: it's simple and clean — just what I had envisioned. I've become friends with a printer. I have received better feedback than I expected. Self-publishing involves the correct execution of many tasks and steps, but when done correctly, the results can be very satisfying.



One final tip is to always sharpen your images!

Call for Submissions

Between the Keys (BtK) is currently welcoming submissions in English on all topics related to the development of pedagogic materials. *Between the Keys* is an open journal, meaning that we accept submissions from everyone, not just JALT members. The magazine is currently published three times a year and distributed [online](#) in PDF format.

We are currently open to the following:

- Research Articles
- Reviews
- Columns

Descriptions and word counts, as well as instructions on how to submit and our statement on copyright can be found below.

Articles

Between the Keys is looking for academic research articles regarding materials design. Articles can be about any aspect of materials design, but should follow accepted professional and academic standards, meaning they must be fully referenced and include sufficient background detail that their wider context is easily understood. They should be between 1500 - 4000 words in length (although longer articles may be divided into sections and published across multiple issues.) All research articles will be proofread and vetted by the members of the JALT Materials WritersDesign SIG and published as a peer-reviewed work.

Reviews

Between the Keys is also looking for thoughtful, discussion-provoking reviews of academic and journalistic articles, textbooks, teaching tools and materials, and presentations. Reviews should follow professional standards and contain a complete citation of the work being reviewed. They should be between 800 to 1000 words regardless of the materials being reviewed. Photos, videos, and other illustrations are encouraged for inclusion with the review.

Columns

At the time of writing, *Between the Keys* has two columns: Musings on Marketing and Key Lessons.

Musings on Marketing

Have you written a textbook or published materials independently? If so, we'd love to hear about it. *Musings on Marketing* is a new column based on Sean Anderson's article of the same name published in *Between the Keys* 30.1 (Spring 2022). The column will run between 800 to 1000 words, ideally broken into 7 to 10 bullet points that reflect on your experiences with materials writing and creation. These might include your route to publication, your day-to-day work in creating your materials, and your reflections on your experience as a whole.

Key Lessons

The past few years have accelerated changes that were already happening in our classrooms due to changes in technology, pedagogical theory, and materials design. What we'd like to know is how that has affected your teaching practice. In particular, we'd like you to share lesson plans that reflect these changes. In short, tell us about a lesson plan you have perfected, are working the knots out of, or are considering implementing soon. What sparked the idea and how has it worked out? What materials did you create or adapt to use in your lesson plan?

Additionally

In addition to the formats listed above, *Between the Keys* is open to a wide range of "other" articles and columns. We welcome:

- perspective/opinion pieces (up to 1500 words)
- responses to BtK articles (up to 1000 words)
- letters to the editor (up to 500 words)
- interviews with materials-related writers, publishers, academics (up to 1500 words)

Submissions

All submissions should follow these guidelines. Any submissions that fail to do so will not be considered.

- Submissions should be sent to publications@materialswriters.org.
- The submitted work should be formatted as either an MS Word document or a Google Docs document.
- Any photos or illustrations necessary should be included in a separate archive file (e.g. a zip file).
- Please include a brief cover letter describing the submitted work (e.g. article, review, etc.) and a brief biography of the author.

If you do not have a completed piece of work to submit but wish to know if it might be suited for *Between the Keys*, please send an email to the address listed above with the word "pitch" in the subject line. If we think your work is right for the magazine, we will work with you to see it to completion.

Between the Keys accepts work for publication year-round. Once a piece is accepted, the author may be requested to make changes for purposes of clarity, length, or other publishing considerations. While it is always our intent to publish work as soon as possible, we cannot guarantee any specific length of time between acceptance and publication.

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