

Self-Publishing 101 with Mama Bitchtress: eBook Formats

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Sometimes, given that I've been epublished since 2006 and worked in epublishing since 2007, I forget how baffling ebooks and formats are if you're a writer who sticks to paperbacks. Even a writer who has a Kindle might not know the ins and outs of it all.

This'll be a short post, a primer on the subject if you're new to things. (It is also current to 2015; if you're reading this post in the future, for all I know ebooks are being streamed directly into your brain.) This is also just covering a couple of basics; there are loads of different formats, but I only worry about the ones that either third party sellers want or are selling well for me personally.

When I started in epublishing a hundred years ago (okay, nine), there were three main formats: PDF, HTML, and LIT. A lot has changed, I don't think LIT is even a thing anymore, and now we have shiny new ones as ebook readers have become the norm. The golden oldies are still around, however.

1. PDF

This is the simple, basic one that just about anyone can read on their computer and it's been around a long time. PDFs are nice because they tend to come out exactly as you've laid them out. You can make a PDF with your word processor much of the time.

They can be a little trickier to read on your ereader unless converted so the text can vary a bit. I remember trying to read one laid out standard letter-sized on my basic Kindle and it was not exactly fun--my options were itty bitty text unless I turned it sideways, and then I had to do a lot of scrolling. So PDF is great for a lot of readers but won't necessarily be right for everyone.

This file extension is .pdf. You can view PDFs by downloading Adobe Reader free.

2. MOBI

This is the file that's commonly read on Kindles (and what I upload to KDP for sale, where it's converted to AZW). These file extensions are

.mobi and .prc. You can view these files on your desktop by downloading Mobipocket Reader.

3. EPUB

Epub is probably the most widely-supported format. Nook, Kobo, Sony, etc all use EPUB. This is what I upload to those stores for sale. Like MOBI, and unlike PDF, the text adjusts depending on the ereader you're using to fit the screen. You can read these files on your desktop with various programs (I still use Sony Reader for PC).

4. HTML

The pro of HTML is that it can be read in any browser and usually loaded onto ereaders without trouble, with reflowable content. The con is that if you want images, you'll need a separate folder (hands up if you're an old ebook reader and remember stumbling across a file where you'd lost the folder with the pictures, leaving you with random squares with unloadable graphics), so generally I make my HTML files without any images and just basic text. These file extensions are .html or .htm.

So those are the four I focus on when I'm making ebook files for self-published authors.

Do you need all of them?

Depends on where you're selling. IMO, I think that it's a good idea to offer the basic formats because you're going to have a lot of readers who all have different e-reading devices, and you don't want to say "Sorry, no, I won't take your EPUB money because I only have MOBI available".

Should you make your own files?

If you are very familiar with the different formats and can test them on ereaders, and know for sure you can produce clean files, sure, go for it. If you're only uploading to, say, Kindle, I believe you can upload a doc, they'll convert it, and you'll probably have something decent enough. But there are a lot of fussy things to worry about, like weird characters

showing up, how to use headings, blank lines getting stripped out, etc, that you should be aware of.

A clean, working ebook file is just as important as a properly laid out interior print book--it can make or break the reading experience for your customers. Like having good editing and cover art, don't skimp on your ebook formatting.

HOW do you make all your formats?

Again, that depends; I have my process, which uses a couple of different programs for the various files, but mine isn't the only way, and sorry, I am not getting into Ebook Formatting 101 here. :-P

It's worth picking up Calibre and learning the ins and outs of it, as you can convert different file formats with it however I caution writers against relying on it solely for conversion, as sometimes things can get a bit wonky. If you're going to try making your own ebook formats, make sure you download various desktop versions of readers so you can double check the files.

Later we're going to talk about all the places you can sell ebooks and what formats they take, but first we're going to cover Hiring an Editor and Hiring a Cover Artist. Join me next time!