Ebook Errors:
Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

At Vook, we've built thousands of ebooks and seen every error in the format. Publishing an ebook doesn't have to be difficult if authors and ebook building services are aware of common pitfalls along the way. Avoiding errors saves you time, upholds your reputation, and prevents negative online reviews.

Think about J.K. Rowling's recent release, *The Casual Vacancy*, in which pre-ordered ebooks arrived with major [errors](#). People who had purchased the ebook before 3pm on the release date had to re-download the corrected ebook. This didn't necessarily hurt reviews, but it received a lot of negative press (not all publicity is good publicity when your reputation is on the line).

Similarly, Walter Isaacson's *Steve Jobs* was removed from Apple's iBookstore in 2011 and replaced with a new version due to formatting [errors](#). One iBookstore reviewer wrote: "I want my money back. The formatting errors in the iBooks version are appalling. At first, a caption is missing or just a word, but it soon becomes illegible. The publisher should be ashamed."

These poor reviews didn't reflect the book's actual content, but rather one-time errors that were fixable and, just as importantly, avoidable. In this guide, we'll cover and solve common ebook errors and pitfalls, including:
1. **Production errors:** The common mistakes during the ebook-production process
2. **Design errors:** Mistakes during the design process, before and after conversion
3. **Sales errors:** Pitfalls of the distribution and sales processes
4. **Marketing errors:** Easily overlooked aspects of ebook marketing

Part 1
Production Errors

Below we cover the major errors of the production process—from preparing the manuscript to converting it to an ebook. In Part 2, we'll go over the design errors, but for now, here are things that can easily go wrong when you convert your book to epub (Nook, iPad, iPhone) and mobi (Kindle) files.

Error: Complex files pre-conversion
Manuscripts in Word documents are always preferable over PDFs, which are locked down and inflexible for anyone who needs to reformat the content. In Word documents, the text is encoded, with all of the characters properly spaced out. Word files are easily editable for an author converting a manuscript on her own *and* for ebook building services (who may charge extra to break apart PDFs).

Error: Relying on Print to Digital Conversions (OCR)

Many error-prone ebooks emerge from a process called "optical character recognition" (OCR), in which the print or PDF version of a title is scanned page by page. Backlist titles are often converted into ebooks through OCR because publishers do not have digital versions of printed books. The process is imperfect and often introduces errors: OCR does not always distinguish between particular characters, even with legible typefaces. Words such as "he" could be reproduced as "be" (and vice versa). Other common mix-ups are: s→f, e→c, sh→m, and rn→m.

Some OCR software offers "double-entry" scanning to combat these errors. Physical books are scanned twice and the software then identifies discrepancies in the digital output. Double-entry scanning catches many but not all errors, leading to a mistake-laden ebook upon publication. The only solution is meticulous proofreading. While publishers and wise self-published authors proofread (and employ friends and family to help), OCR-converted ebooks are more likely to be overlooked. It's often assumed that upon original publication, these titles were already proofread.

Error: Sizing images too large

Images should not be so big that the ebook takes too long to download, but big enough that a reader can click on the image, enlarge it, and zoom in (on the iPad, iPhone, Kindle Fire, and Nook). The hard limit is 2 megapixels (there are one million pixels in a megapixel). To calculate the megapixels of an image, find the image properties and multiply the length and width. 1000 pixels length or width is recommended to see images clearly on larger screens and the iPad 3, which has a retina display. This size is simultaneously small enough so as not to increase the loading time and ebook size.
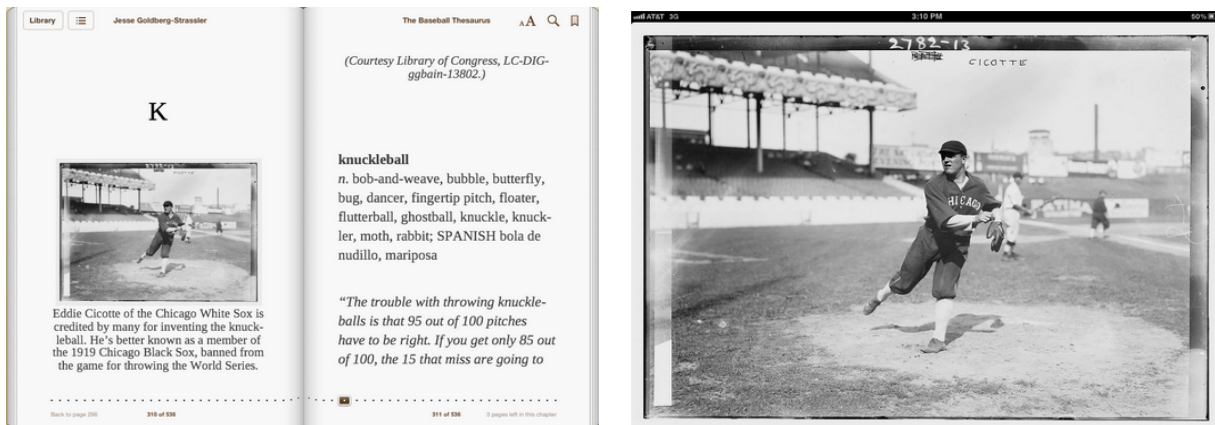
Above: A screen grab of *The Baseball Thesaurus*, as viewed on an iPad, and the enlarged photograph.

Error: Making the ebook size too large

Not only do large ebook sizes slow the downloading process, but some e-retailers have file-size limitations. The maximum epub and mobi sizes depend on the relationship an author or ebook distributor has with the retailer. Maximum ebook sizes are:

- Apple iBookstore—2 GB
- Barnes & Noble PubIt!—20 MB
- Barnes & Noble via a distribution service that works with multimedia-enhanced ebooks—600 MB
- Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing—50 MB
- Amazon via a distribution service—650 MB

Regarding Barnes & Noble specifically: even though the Nook Color supports multimedia enhancements, you won't be able to upload an enhanced ebook to their store unless you have a Vendor of Record account with them.

Error: Unnecessary anchor links

Anchor links—links to other parts within the ebook—are best for footnotes, endnotes, and glossaries, but they are an arduous process. Many authors will start building an ebook with plans to link each section in the table of contents to its corresponding text in the body of the ebook. However, eReaders have built-in table of contents that can save authors hours of time building and testing links. Unless you are using a custom service or are willing to put a lot of time into building anchor links, do not plan your ebook to rely heavily upon anchor links for a table of contents. Some authors choose to forgo the table of contents altogether in favor of the eReaders' built-in systems.
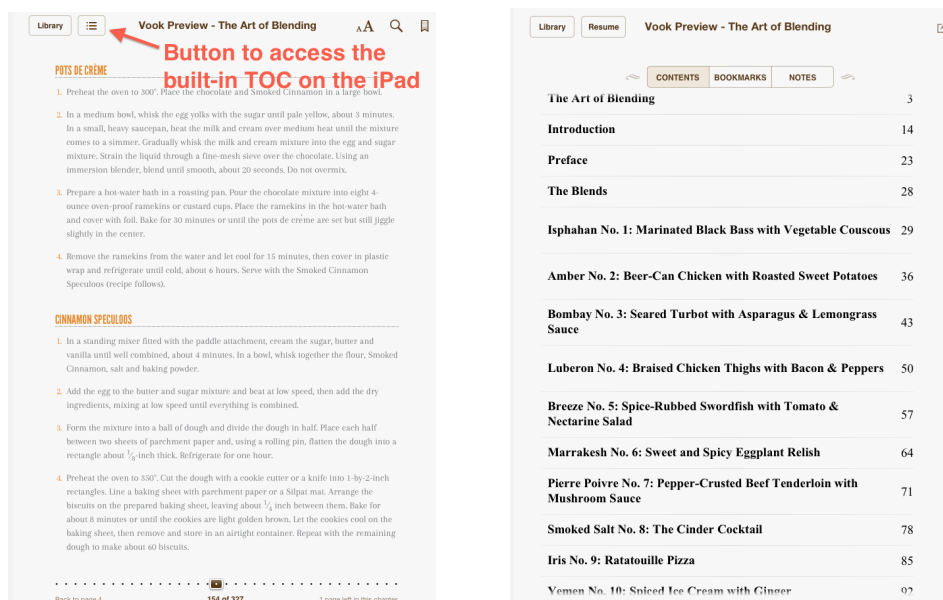
Above: A page from *The Art of Blending* in the iPad and the device's built-in table of contents. The iPad has already linked sections internally, saving the author time.

Error: Unfamiliarity with device capabilities
Multimedia enhancements are only supported on some devices:
- iPad, iPhone, and iPod Touch with iBooks
- Nook Color and Nook Tablet
- Kindle Apps for iOS (not Kindles themselves)
- Vook.com browser-based Web Reader

Desktop computers and Kindles cannot play videos or audio embedded in ebooks.

**Error: Not testing on the major devices**
If you hire an ebook building service to make your ebook, be sure they test epub and mobi files across all devices for the major retailers. Assuming you want to sell on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Apple's iBookstore, test the ebook on a Kindle, Nook, and iPad. If you build the ebook yourself, try your best to test on these three devices. At the very least, test on one, playing with the fonts and text sizes to see how the ebook reflows with each size (see part 2). Make sure that headlines, indents, and other formatting characteristics are consistent throughout the ebook. If you have any external or anchor links, test each one.

Part 2
Design Errors

Before the ebook conversion process even begins, make sure you have not designed a manuscript without familiarizing yourself with the capabilities of epub and mobi files. When building an ebook, the coding and design are meshed together, so a PDF designed exactly to your specifications might not translate when coded to an ebook. If you hire a designer for your manuscript, make sure they know that they're designing for epub and mobi files, not just PDFs and InDesign files.

A distinction to be made: Reflowable vs. fixed layout
The majority of ebooks on the market are "reflowable." Reflowable means that when the reader changes the font size, the text is shuffled to the next page and the pages break in different places. A single epub renders differently on the Barnes & Noble Nook and iPad, while the mobi file for that same ebook renders differently on different versions of the Amazon Kindle. This presents unique challenges for ebook designers, such as the inability to include full-bleed images and text arranged in columns. Despite these limitations, reflowable ebooks are cheaper to produce, making it easier for an author to distribute to the major marketplaces.
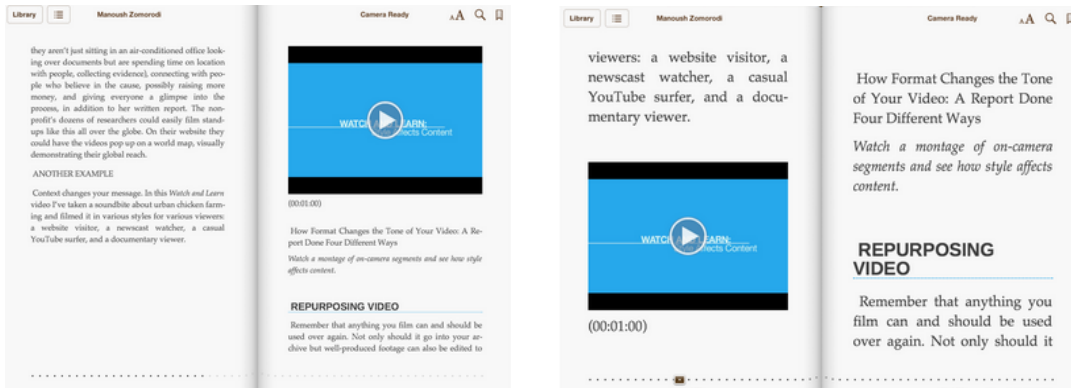
Above: *Camera Ready*, a reflowable ebook, as viewed on an iPad with different font sizes.
Below: A fixed-layout ebook, *In Remarkable We Trust*.
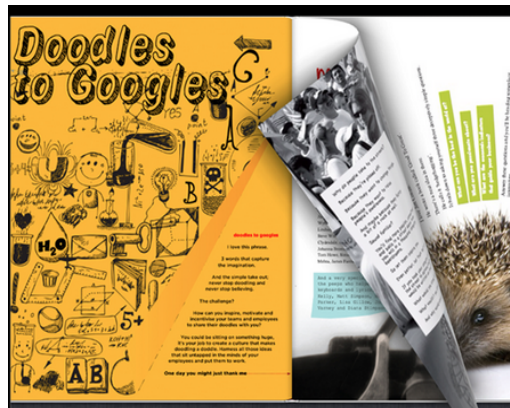
Fixed-layout ebooks, however, preserve each page's content to match the original design. They work best for children's books, coffee-table books, and magazine-style layouts. While they give the author more control over the ebook design (such as full-bleed images and text arranged in columns), they need to be coded separately for each device. The cost could potentially prevent an author from distributing to all of the major marketplaces.

Error: Not controlling page breaks
Because ebooks are reflowable, chapter titles, headers, and sub-headers can be split from the text that immediately follows. To avoid this issue, you or your ebook builder should specify in the CSS that chapter titles, headers, and sub-headers should stay together as a group. Note that the same CSS properties are not supported across all eReaders.

Above: Chapter headlines flowing to the next page

Error: Ignoring spacing capabilities
While reflowable ebooks cannot mirror all capabilities in PDF and InDesign files, your ebook does not need to be one continuous block of text (although sometimes this is preferable in novels). In addition to images, videos, and numerical or bulleted lists, there are other ways to break up text into manageable chunks, making it easier for the reader to orient himself in the content. To visually set text apart, consider using:

- **Indented quotes:** These make it easier for the reader to follow the book's content and not get lost in long quotes. Smaller quotes can also be distinguished with font size and color.
- **Tip boxes:** Like the callouts or sidebars in textbooks, tip boxes highlight small bits of information. They can be set apart with bold lines or arranged in more complex squares (see below).

Above: Examples of quotes set apart with indentation and font

TIP:

When tuning manually, listen for clashing "waves" between the string you are tuning and the one you are fretting for reference. This effect will be more pronounced, with the waves pulsing more frequently the more you are out of tune. As you adjust the tuning pegs, bringing the string into more accurate pitch, you will notice that the waves will become less dramatic and eventually imperceptible as you achieve a properly matched pitch.

vance for something that is unique, different or an extraordinary story. Many people will say, if you're getting $50-100k, you're doing well.

Quick Tip: Advances are negotiable.

I've heard people double their advances or get more for say worldwide rights (find out what your advance covers in terms of Rights - do they just want North American?).

Above: Basic and more complex tip boxes

Error: Messy tables and charts

In reflowable ebooks, tables and charts will likely get broken up as text flows over to the next page when font sizes are adjusted. You can save these as images, but they would not be searchable or selectable as text. Alternatively, you can code a table with live text, which would make it searchable and selectable, but this is time consuming if you're building the ebook on your own and may result in extra costs from a custom ebook building service. Figure out what's best for your ebook by analyzing whether or not your readers would want to search and select content contained in the chart.

Error: Underlining content

It is almost guaranteed that e-retailers will not accept ebooks that contain underlined text in the body because underlined text tends to be mistaken for links. If you plan on using underlined text for titles or emphasizing words, opt for italics instead. Note: not to be confused with underlined text, headers *can* have a solid-line style.

Error: Designing ebook covers for print

Ebook covers have different challenges than their print counterparts. Most shoppers will first see your ebook cover when it's a small thumbnail amidst a grid of ebooks on e-retailers. The small size of these thumbnails brings new challenges for cover design because covers render differently on different devices. To make an ebook cover legible in any situation, consider:

- Making your title as big as possible while still legible within the dimensions of your cover image (usually 600 by 800-900 pixels). Letters can almost touch the edges of the digital cover (practically unthinkable on print covers).
- Aiming to design the author name in large text as well.
- Avoiding outlined text; it will only make the text illegible as the screens get smaller.

Above: An ebook cover as it renders on different devices.

Read more about ebook cover design on Vook's blog and see examples of successful and unsuccessful ebook covers on thebookdesigner.com.

Part 3
Sales & Retail Errors

Error: Not doing your distribution research
Without vendor contracts, e-retailers take a standard percent of royalties that can be confusing; rates and additional fees are based on the type of content and price you want to set. Be sure to read the fine print. You can read more about general distribution terms here or on Vook.com.

Third party vendor accounts with the e-retailers can reduce the royalty cut by a significant percent. Furthermore, a distribution service bypasses the hassle of signing up with each retailer separately. Good distribution services also give authors a means to track sales across all retailers.

Error: Ignoring the power of previews
If your book doesn't have reviews on sites like Amazon, or if you're a first-time author, it's essential to let shoppers preview your book before purchasing. While an ebook preview is one of the last details in the publishing process, it should not be an afterthought. Allowing shoppers to preview your eBook increases the chance of making the sale. Consider what you would do while shopping at a brick-and-mortar store. If you see an intriguing book by a first-time author with whom you're not familiar, you likely read the first few paragraphs to get a feel for the writing. Give customers the same experience online with free previews, always leaving them wanting more. Examples for various genres include:

- **Novel previews:** These might not necessarily be the first chapter; the best option will be an excerpt that ends on a cliffhanger or piques the reader's interest in the story. Longer previews could be more valuable in order to establish the plot and connect the reader to the characters.

- **Nonfiction previews:** Whether historical, political, or philosophical, nonfiction ebooks can provide excerpts of stimulating, well-supported information on the topic to establish credibility.
- **Cookbook previews:** The best provide one or two *strong* recipes to likewise establish credibility on the subject.
- **Business strategy previews:** Again, this is your opportunity to establish yourself as the authority on the topic. When a shopper reads one good piece of advice, she'll trust that the rest will also benefit her.
- **Fitness, sports, and diet book previews:** Release a few exercises and tips to begin the shopper's learning process. To keep going, he'll have to purchase the whole ebook!

Error: Not taking advantage of an e-retailer landing page

Make the most of the free landing pages that Amazon, iBookstore, Barnes & Noble, and other e-retailers provide. In addition to the book description (see Part 4), include press and the best reader reviews as well as an author bio.

Error: Not running price promotions

If you have the rights to price your own ebooks, don't shun price promotions. Reducing the price, even lowering it to free temporarily, is a great way to increase sales in the long run. When ebooks are temporarily set to free, downloads will increase, moving your book further up the charts. Specifically, when Amazon downloads increase, the ebooks are more likely to be circulated in Amazon's recommendation engine. You're also more likely to get customer reviews on your ebooks' landing pages. When the price promotion isn't tied to a particular occasion (e.g. the book's launch or a holiday sale), the duration should be one week or under.

If your ebook is available in print, marketing this and the ebook are not mutually exclusive. [Ariane de Bonvoisin](#), author of *What I Wish Someone Had Told Me About Writing A Book*, advises authors to be creative when marketing print and ebooks in tandem. "For example," she writes, "make a special offer 1/3 of the way through your ebook where you offer a special discount if they buy the paper version, for themselves or a friend who may prefer it in its traditional format."

Part 4
Marketing Errors

Error: Ignoring metadata
An easy pitfall is not understanding the impact of metadata; it's not a simple form to quickly fill out upon completion of your ebook. Components include:

- **Audience:** Classify your readership to help categorize your title in the various marketplaces. Trade (TRA) is the most general category but the more specific, the better.
- **BISAC subject**: BISAC is a system of letter and number codes that further describe the subject of the ebook. It begins with a major heading (e.g. "fiction") and then specific headings within that category (e.g. "fiction/fantasy"). When properly selected, a BISAC helps ensure that shoppers can quickly find your title. Learn more about BISAC subjects [here](#).
- **Keywords**: Tag your ebook with keywords to increase search visibility and drive traffic to your ebook in the marketplaces. Try to imagine what your target audience would google to find a book like yours. Amazon allows up to 100 characters, so stay within this limit.
- **International availability:** If you have rights to publish all of the content contained in your ebook for international countries, consider doing so to increase sales.
- **Marketing description:** Read more about descriptions below.

Error: Boring book description
The biggest marketing error: providing a poor, un-engaging book description. Expect to put a lot of time into it. It is your opportunity to grab your audience's attention with an engaging description that reflects the content, genre, and your writing style. It can be a few sentences or a couple paragraphs as long; just don't give away the entire book! You want to keep the audience wanting more. Hugh Howey, a best-selling, self-published author, provided the below description for his ebook series, *[Wool](#)*:

> "This is the story of mankind clawing for survival, of mankind on the edge. The world outside has grown unkind, the view of it limited, talk of it forbidden. But there are always those who hope, who dream. These are the dangerous people, the residents who infect others with their optimism. Their punishment is simple. They are given the very thing they profess to want: They are allowed outside."

It leaves readers wanting more, not burdening them with a long description. Book descriptions are also a great place to add one or two *brief* quotes from positive reviews.

Error: No author website
Once you've finished your first book—be it self-published or through a publisher—it's critical that you build an online presence, ideally before the book is even released. Just because a book has a landing page on Amazon, iTunes, and Barnes & Noble does not mean that you shouldn't build an individual website to promote yourself and your books. In fact, the presence of landing pages on these different channels can make your marketing efforts confusing. You need one central place to

drive all your traffic and make it easy for interested readers to purchase the eBook that's right for their devices of choice.

An author website gives you the flexibility to brand yourself, highlight your best work, acquire more fans, and convert them into customers. With free platforms like WordPress that require no HTML/CSS knowledge, and with freelancers on demand, it's easier than ever to build a site. Read more about author websites on Vook's blog.

Above: The header of author Ariane de Bonvoisin's website.

Error: Making it difficult to find your ebook

Make sure it is easy for customers to know exactly where they can purchase your ebooks. Include links to all vendors for each ebook on your website, in your newsletters, and any other content published online (columns, guest blogs, etc).

Above: Ebook e-retailer availability as displayed on Allen Zadoff, Manoush Zomorodi, and Warren Adler's websites.

Error: Complicated review copies

If you are sending free review copies to the press or blogs for review, make sure it is extremely easy for them to access the ebook using either a direct download link or a free promo code with crystal-clear instructions as to how to download the ebook.

Conclusion

So, how can you avoid these errors? Use this guide as a checklist before you build the ebook, while you're in the process, and upon completion. Have friends, families, and trusted colleagues read over your book. Study best-selling books to see what their authors are and aren't doing. Avoidable ebook errors should not have to hurt your sales, reviews, and reputation.