

# So, You Want to Start a Zine?

by Steven Svymbersky // reprinted from <http://www.zinebook.com>

In one way at least, zines are like every other form of media and entertainment. The worst sin they can commit is to be boring, and it is a sin committed all too frequently by small press publishers. Yes, even you could cobble together enough material to create something the same shape and definition as a magazine, maybe even a whole book—but that doesn't mean you should.

Before getting out your scissors and committing your thoughts to paper, ask yourself, "Do I have anything new to say? Do I know any new ways to say them?" These are tough questions to answer honestly. Everybody thinks their ideas are truth. So also ask yourself, "Do I have any talent? Can I write better than your average college graduate? Can I draw a straight line consistently? Do I have superior taste and sense of design?" When you've answered yes to all these questions, ask them of someone close to you—someone who will tell you the truth.

Finally, if it is agreed by many that you have the direction and talent to pull off something special, take the time to do it right. For you extraordinary few, I offer these recommendations in the hope that as you prepare to cast your lure, you'll do it with skill and panache. The rest of you can go back to watching TV.

## SIZE

### Digest and Half-Legal

8 1/2" x 11" or 11" x 14" folded and stapled is the ideal size for zines that have no ambitions beyond impressing their friends, trading with other zines and getting their work reviewed in other zines, which, I believe, is all the majority of zines should ever hope for. This size is cheaper to mail, fits in your purse or back pocket, requires less design skill, and doubles the page count you would have if you were to put the same amount of copy on folded 11" x 17" pages or, God forbid, 8 1/2" x 11" pages that are just stapled together.

### Standard

This is the most common size, 11" x 17" folded in half and stapled. At this size you are forced to make design decisions. Eight or 12 pages of straight type in columns is OK for a newsletter, but more than that and it's too dense and boring. You need to give the pages visual appeal, balance white and dark spaces, and make use of illustrations. If you don't you may find yourself with interesting writing that no one will bother to read. Remember, just because it's D.I.Y. doesn't mean it's OK if it looks terrible.

### Tabloid

Except when printed on newsprint and distributed locally as free

papers that are meant to be discarded, this size is cumbersome and requires design experience and talent to keep it interesting..

### Mini

Even more disposable and difficult to read than tabloids; this size can be a good way for artists or cartoonists to distribute samples of their work.

## COVER

### Color

I wouldn't say it's entirely necessary, but color goes a long way towards selling your publication, if that's your goal. Even in the small press, many zines are springing for color Xerox covers, which, if you're printing less than 500 is often less expensive than color offset. If your zine is digest-sized you can get two covers on each 8 1/2" x 11" page. If you're printing more than 1000 copies using offset, each additional color can often run you less than \$100. Another way to get a distinctive look is to have the cover printed with a color other than black. That won't cost you any more at all.

### Information

If you intend to sell your publication on newsstands there are rules that, when broken, will drive distributors and retailers to treat your work badly. For instance, the title should be all the way at the top so it can be seen when stacked behind other magazines. Somewhere you also should print the issue number and price. Most distributors require that UPC thing. It is often helpful to list on the cover some of the more interesting items readers will find inside, but this is usually overdone, and generally it helps readers decide they don't need your publication as often as it sells it.

### Artwork

I look for publications with great artwork on the covers, which goes with my distaste for too much information on the cover. I like to see something provocative and expertly rendered. It's irritating to see a cover with great artwork desecrated by a bunch of words.

## DESIGN

### Typefaces

There are still diehards typing their zines on typewriters, and there's nothing wrong with that, as long as the design is clean and easy to read. Still, for the most part getting access to a computer and different fonts is as easy as going to your library or

copy shop. If you have a lot of text it's best to stick with a straightforward font such as Times, Garamond or Stone. Serif fonts are generally easier to read than Sans Serif. Titles, headlines, lists, sidebars, pull quotes, and captions are some of the places you can use the fancier, quirkiest typefaces.

### **Artwork**

No matter how good a writer you are or how brilliant the articles you've collected may be, you need to include illustrations. You can cut them from old books and magazines or spend the energy it takes to find good artists who will submit work, but I implore you to dress those pages up. Have pity on us poor Philistines who hate a publication with no pictures. Please! If your printing is photocopy or web press, you're better off using line drawings because these processes often darken and muddy artwork.

If you use photographs be sure they're high-contrast. Having photo-stats made will increase the quality of photograph reproduction, but they can be expensive if you're working with a small or non-existent budget. Your average scanner may improve your reproduction slightly, or it may make it worse, while high-end computer technology will give you the polished deal, if you know how to use it.

### **Overall**

Get yourself to the biggest newsstand you can find and examine the publications you think look good. Look at the fonts they're using, how they balance the artwork, text, and white space. Is the text in two, three, or four columns? Do they use graphic borders? Where do the ads fit into the design? Look at the ones you think suck and ask yourself the same questions. This will give you an idea of the direction you should take.

## **PRODUCTION**

### **Editing**

Once you have the articles and stories you want to print, it's important to edit them, not only for errors but for coherency and brevity. The writer of that long-winded rant may be a friend you don't wish to offend, or you may feel it's not your place to decide if someone else's writing is unclear and sophomoric, in which case you don't deserve to be an editor. You'll just be a collator. You also should proofread your copy once it's typeset and again after it's laid out. Don't let those spelling and grammar errors get past you; they have a way of deflating the impact of your work.

### **Layout**

To do your layout the old fashioned way, you'll need some Bristol board, a ruler, Exacto knives, and rubber cement or a hand-waxer, all of which can be purchased at any art supply store. All copy and artwork are placed on the boards by hand; to do a clean job

you'll need practice. Of course, desktop publishing software has all but eclipsed the need for this messy method, although some find it less fun than getting their hands dirty and putting their sweat into it. Quark XPress and Pagemaker are excellent programs that, when mastered, give you the ability to make your publication look just like the real thing.

## **PRINTING**

As long as you're printing less than 200 copies, photocopying is the cheapest way to go. Some copiers can even achieve offset quality, but most can't, so be sure you know what you're getting if you leave it at the copy shop. If you're printing more than 200 copies, offset printing is not usually any more expensive than photocopying. Newsprint will be even cheaper. Offset gives you the best reproduction, but even here quality varies wildly from printer to printer. You should always ask to see samples of a printer's work.

You also should ask how the printer will bind and cut your zine, what kinds of paper stocks he or she can print on, and how soon he or she can deliver. Higher overhead usually make printer's prices in big cities much higher. Finding a printer in another state can mean big savings, but don't forget to factor in the cost of shipping. Prices per copy also drop quickly when you start printing in the thousands of copies. The more you print, the cheaper it gets.

## **DISTRIBUTION**

### **Review Zines**

It's a good idea to send your zine to as many other publications who review zines as you can afford. It's a good idea to send your zine to as many other publications who review zines as possible. Review zines include A Reader's Guide to the Underground Press, PMB 2386, 537 Jones, San Francisco, CA 94102 (undergroundpress.org) and Zine Guide (P.O. Box 5467, Evanston, Illinois, 60204). You'll find an updated list of review zines online at <http://www.escape.ca/~mosfog/izines.htm>.

Zines that are similar in theme to yours also are good places to find publications that you might want to trade with. Trading is a great way to get zines, but be warned, a lot of zines have stopped accepting trades because they were getting too many shitty zines in return. How many times must I say it? Don't muck up the water with a half-assed, pointless publication! If you want to create something but have no talent and are lazy, join a rock band; the odds of success are much better.

### **Distributors**

Except in rare cases, your average photocopied, 20- to 40-page, digest-sized zine has few distribution options beyond trading with other zines, putting ads in other zines, and self-distributing the zine to stores that will take them on consignment. Few magazine distributors are willing to go through the time and paperwork involved for zines if only because they usually only cost a buck or two. It's not worth it for the minuscule amount of money they make.

Exceptions are usually made for zines that have found a fascinating subject that no other magazine covers and are exceptionally well written. Once you have offset printing and attractive covers (especially with color printing), your chances of getting one of a small press distributor to take you increase greatly. Unfortunately, there are only a few of them, such as Desert Moon and Tower Records.

A few book publishers and distributors like Last Gasp carry a small selection of zines as well, and some zine editors run

small distros that might have 20 or 30 titles. Large distributors may order hundreds of copies, but they will also want at least a 50 percent discount and in most cases not return your unsold copies. Instead you will receive an affidavit reporting how many copies were sold and returned. Getting payment can take from two to six months average. Other resources on zine distribution include *How Businesses and Institutions Attempt to Control the Small Press* (The Match #88 and #90, \$2.75 each from Fred Woodworth, Box 3012, Tucson, AZ 85702) and *The Whizz-banger Guide to Zine Distributors* (\$3 from Shannon Colebank, Box 5591, Portland, OR 97228).

### Consignment

There are a few stores like *Quimby's* in Chicago that have made it their mission to carry a wide selection of zines and comix. Occasionally they will buy them outright, but primarily they are taken on consignment, meaning they will pay you for the copies they've sold and return the ones they haven't. Usually they pay 60 percent of the cover price and return whole copies. When dealing with stores, you may find it necessary to follow up on how your zine is doing, and when you can expect payment.

### Give 'Em Away

The other distribution option is to leave stacks of your zine at stores and restaurants. The advantages are that you don't have to deal with collecting money and your chances of selling advertising are greatly increased. Advertisers may figure they can at least be sure people will see your publication and, possibly, their ad. Of course, unless you have money to throw away or are able to scam free printing, giving your publication away makes it all the more incumbent to sell advertising, an occupation that's only slightly smellier than cleaning sewers.

## FINANCING

### Getting It Free

It's no coincidence that a large number of zine publishers work in copy shops or know someone who does. Especially now that most copy shops have all the desktop publishing tools you need. Employee discounts can be incredibly liberal depending on how closely the boss keeps track of things. Many office jobs also provide access to excellent photocopying machines, so you might consider temping.

### Selling It

Another thing to look for when you're checking out other zines on the newsstand and in review zines is pricing. Nothing will kill your sales faster than being overpriced. Conversely, the lower your cover price, the more likely consumers will buy your wares. If you're selling copies through mail order, you only need to account for how much your zine cost you to produce and its mailing cost, but if you're selling it through distributors and stores, you have to expect to collect about half the cover price. It is extremely rare for a publication to make back even its costs solely from sales.

### Advertising

Selling ads takes more time and energy than zine production, and it requires a motivated person who likes to kiss butt.

Unfortunately, record labels are the only major buyers of ads in zines, which is why so many publishers print at least a few music reviews. Reviews are the primary way that zines can attract advertisers. For instance, video distributors usually place their ads in zines with film reviews and coverage.

If your publication is locally oriented, and especially if it is distributed free, you have a better chance of getting retailers, restaurants and other businesses to buy space. Of course, the greater your distribution, the more you can charge for ads. Bartering and trading for ads is always more appealing to potential advertisers, and it can be just as profitable. I've heard of some publishers who have so much restaurant credit from ads, they never have to buy a meal. *Bon appetit.*

*Steven Svymbersky is the former owner of Quimby's Book Store in Chicago. This article is anti-copyright and may be distributed freely as long as this notice is attached.*

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## Zine Voices

*While preparing "The Book of Zines," Chip Rowe asked each contributor about why they do a zine.*

"Publishing a zine is easy, it's cheap, it's fun, it's something to do when you're bored, it's a greeting card, it's a business card, it's expression, it's a stab at definition and critical evaluation, praise and condemnation for whomever or whatever you wanna poke or parade." —Bob Bellerue, *Basurame*

"Don't get too discouraged when you return to the copy place to pick up your finished product and the guy behind the counter yells out to his co-workers, 'El Sucko is back!' " —Steve Steinberg, *Meanwhile...*

"It's not enough to say, I can do this. You have to say, I can do this better." —Dan Kelly, *Chum*

"Why publish a zine? 1. To make money. 2. For the same reason I call my friends. I have some gossip or revelation to tell, and I hope to hear some back too. 3. It's a good excuse for dates with the interviewees." —Lisa Carver, *Rollerderby*

"My favorite part of doing a zine is when someone gets the joke." —Jeff Koyen, *Crank*

"I love getting mail. Also, I love that moment when everything is all glued and ready to be reproduced. And research—I'll take any excuse to go to the library and paw through old magazines." —Al Hoff, *Thrift SCORE*

"Don't try to make everyone love you and your zine." —Sean Tejaratchi, *Crap Hound*

"Does the world really need another grubby little zine? Standard answer: None's ever been grubby in quite this way before." —John Marr, from *Murder Can Be Fun*, Issue 1

# Books About Zines

## ANTHOLOGIES

*The Book of Zines: Readings From the Fringe*

edited by Chip Rowe (1997)

Anthology of pop culture writings from about 80 zines.

*The Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*

edited by Tristan Taormino and Karen Green (1997)

Anthology from zines created by women.

*Factsheet 5 Zine Reader*

edited by Seth Friedman (1997)

Anthology of zine articles selected by well-known "zine bible."

*Zine Yearbook, Volumes 1-4 (1997-2000)*

edited by Jen Angel (jenangel@mindspring.com)

Annual anthology of zine writing.

## INTERVIEWS AND HISTORY

*Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics From 1976 to Now*

edited by Roger Sabin & Teal Triggs (2001)

Includes interviews and five essays.

*Zines, Volume 1*

by V. Vale (1996)

Interviews with editors, including those from Beer Frame, Crap Hound, Thrift SCORE and Housewife Turned Assassin.

*Zines, Volume 2*

by V. Vale (1997)

More interviews with editors, including the creators of 8-Track Mind, Dishwasher, McJob, Murder Can Be Fun and Temp Slave.

*Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*

by Stephen Duncombe (1997)

Recommended. Explores the history of zines and zine making.

*The World of Zines: A Guide to the Independent Magazine Revolution*

by Mike Gunderloy & Cari Goldberg Janice (1992)

Collection of reviews from early issues of *Factsheet 5*.

## HOW-TO MANUALS

*Make a Zine!: A Guide to Self-Publishing Disguised As a Book on How to Produce a Zine*

by Bill Brent (1997)

Practical information on creating a paper zine.

*Zine Scene: The Do-It-Yourself Guide*

by Francesca Lia Block and Hillary Carlip (1998)

Recommended. More practical advice on creating your own paper zine, as well as excerpts from some great zines.

*Poor Richard's E-mail Publishing*

by Chris Pirillo (1998)

The essential guide to publishing a zine via electronic mail, including the best software and promotion techniques.

*How to Publish a Fanzine*

by Mike Gunderloy (1988)

Written by the first editor of *Factsheet 5*, this book is available for free download in PDF format at <http://zinebook.com>

*Jamming the Media: A Citizen's Guide to Reclaiming the Tools of Communication*

by Gareth Branwyn (1997)

This guide to creating DIY media includes a chapter on zines.

*How to Self-Publish Your Own Comic Book*

by Tony Caputo (1997)

A guide to the business, production, distribution and promotion.

*Webworks: E-Zines: Exploring Magazine Design Online*

by Martha Gill (2000)

This manual examines webzines and how to best create them.

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## Classroom Zine Exercise

One method to introduce students to zines is to allow them to collaborate in making one of their own. After presenting a short history of self-publishing (see *Notes from the Underground* by Stephen Duncombe), share and discuss zines gathered from the community or from review zines such as *The Reader's Guide to the Underground Press* or *Zine Guide* (see *Review Zines* on page 2 of this guide). Most likely one or two students will have made their own zine, and they can discuss the challenges and frustrations of their experience. The students can discuss what they like and don't like about each zine, including design elements, writing style and subject matter. The instructor then should pass out sheets of paper for the students to contribute a page to a zine that will be created at the session. It works best if this paper is 4.5 by 5.5 (digest size). Announce that you are creating "The [X]-Minute Zine." The amount of time you set aside can range from 30 minutes (on the short end) to 90 minutes (on the long end), e.g., *The 30-Minute Zine*, or *The 47-Minute Zine*. Provide supplies such as pens, glue sticks, old magazines (for illustrations), rulers, stencils and extra sheets of paper. Allow the students to write anything they desire, but tell them they will be responsible for whatever they put on their page and ask that they include their names. Remind them to keep a border of about a half-inch about all four edges, so that it won't be cut off by the photocopier. Depending on the number of students, one can complete the cover, or the instructor can take care of this. It should include the zine name (i.e., *The [X]-Minute Zine*) and the date and place of creation. You will need to create either a four-page, eight-page or 12-page zine (two adjacent pages copied front to back with two other pages will fill one sheet of paper). The students and time restraints can dictate how many copies of the zine you make for each student; usually two or three is sufficient.