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Is 292 pages a good page count for my new book? – Not too many years ago my answer would have been NO. In 2011, the answer is not quite as clear. We haven't had a printing lesson in this column for a while but I don't see a way around it so bear with me. The Cliff's Notes version of this answer is NO.... Have your book designer make your page count 304 pages. If you want to know why..... (Click here to read more)

Please pick up a plain sheet of $8\frac{1}{2}$ X 11 paper. How many pages are you holding in your hand? If you said two, you are correct. The front of the sheet is page one and the back of the sheet is page two. It doesn't matter if the page is printed or not, it is still a page, so there can NEVER be a 291 page book or a 303 page or any other odd number page count.

Now take that $8\frac{1}{2}$ X 11 sheet of paper and fold it in half to $5\frac{1}{2}$ X $8\frac{1}{2}$. How many $5\frac{1}{2}$ X $8\frac{1}{2}$ pages do you think you have? If you answer four, you are correct. Now take that folded sheet and fold it again to $4\frac{1}{4}$ X $5\frac{1}{2}$. Picture that you trim the top folded edge. How many pages do you think you have now? If you said eight, you're getting the point and will find the rest of the article, easy to understand. If you said anything other than 8, go back and start again.

For those who had the correct answer above, fold that $4\frac{1}{4}$ X $5\frac{1}{2}$ in half one more time to $2\frac{3}{8}$ X $5\frac{1}{2}$. What you are now holding in your hand is what a printer would call a 16 page signature. Why is it called a signature? Who knows... that's what they have been calling it since I started back in the 70's so I'm fine with calling it that. If you put a staple on the folded edge and trim $\frac{1}{8}$ inches off the other three sides, you have a 16 page booklet with a trim size of $2\frac{5}{8}$ X $5\frac{1}{4}$. If you would have folded that in half one more time, you would have had 32 pages. This is the same way books are printed other than the fact that they use larger sheets of paper.

If you would have had a sheet of 23" X 35" paper handy, we could have done the same exercise and ended up with a $5\frac{1}{2}$ X $8\frac{1}{2}$ inch 32 page final product out of a single sheet of paper. Books are generally longer than 32 pages so they are printed in a number of 16 or 32 page "signatures" which are piled on top of each other and trimmed, glued, covers applied and made into a perfect bound book(paperback).

Back to the original 292 book. How many times does 32 go into 292? It goes in it 9.125 times. Do you sense the problem? Go back to your folded signature if you need to. The presses run 16 or 32 pages at a time. That's works great for the 9-32 page signatures but that only gives you

288. The next even page count is 304 (9 32's and 1/16). Anything in between is inefficient which generally means it costs you more.

A good book designer would never give you a text that didn't work efficiently on the press. It is not that difficult to add a little space between lines or take a little space away to give you either 288 or 304 pages but it doesn't always happen. If you find yourself with 292 pages, your choices are to either add blank pages or pay a premium for printing the inefficient page count.

Enter the digital press. All of the above pertains to a traditional offset printing press. Printing presses are used for any quantity above 500 copies. If you plan on printing over 500 copies and your designer gives you a 292 page text file... give it back to them and tell them you need 288 or 304. If you are printing a few hundred copies at a time, your book will be printed on a digital press/copier. Walk up to the corner Staples if you want to see a digital press (don't call it a copy machine or you'll get smacked). Digital presses are closer to copy machines in the way they work than they are to regular printing presses. The primary price difference in the two processes is that with traditional printing, the first production copy is expensive but they are very inexpensive after that, so the more you print, the lower the unit cost, as that setup fee is spread out over more and more books. With digital printing, the first book costs pretty much the same price as the 100th book or the 1000th. It is relatively inexpensive in small quantities but more and more expensive as the quantity increases. (There are a few articles in the archives that go into more detail on the processes). Digital presses like copy machines print on smaller sheets and think more in terms of "sides" than "signatures". Digital presses can print pretty much any page count that you give them.

I tend to deal with people who truly believe they will be selling thousands of books (and many do). It is just as easy to start the process correctly. I am writing this article because I had a real case, just this week involving this exact page count.

The initial order was for a few hundred copies. The books were delivered at 292 pages, no blank pages and everything was fine. A few weeks later a reprint order for several thousand books was received. Anyone who has ever been to my website, www.selfpublishing.com, knows that my pricing is based on 16 page increments. When the author put in the order, there were only two choices.... 288 or 304 pages. She correctly chose 304. Without going into a lot of additional details (which would take up another article), you can picture what happened. A book with 292 printed pages and 12 blank pages showed up. See where the fuzzy line comes in?

If only the designer had laid the book out to a press efficient page count in the first place. In the end, this particular book turned out all right and the books are selling fine. If you find yourself in a similar situation, go back to your designer first. You might not be able to avoid

blanks in the back of the book but you should never need 12. If you never see printing more than a few hundred copies at a time, don't worry too much about the page count. But if you are in that group, you probably left this article a long time ago.