

How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent

How to Write a Great Query Letter

Ask a Literary Agent

by

Noah Lukeman

## About the author

Noah Lukeman is President of Lukeman Literary Management Ltd, which he founded in 1996. His clients include winners of the Pulitzer Prize, American Book Award, Pushcart Prize and O. Henry Award, finalists for the National Book Award, Edgar Award, and Pacific Rim prize, multiple New York Times bestsellers, national journalists, major celebrities, and faculty of universities ranging from Harvard to Stanford. He has also worked in the New York office of a multi-talent management company, where he represented many New York Times Bestsellers, and, prior to founding his agency, he also worked for another New York literary agency. Prior to becoming an agent he worked in the editorial departments of several publishers, including William Morrow, Delphinium Books and Farrar, Straus, Giroux, and as editor of a literary magazine. He was creator of PrePub.com, one of the first publishing rights websites, which eventually became the "Booktracker" division of Inside.com. As a literary agent, he has been written up in media ranging from The New York Times to Variety (Page 1).

Noah Lukeman is also an accomplished author. His best-selling *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), was a selection of many of *Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers* and is now part of the curriculum in many universities. His *The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life* (St. Martins Press, 2002) was a National Bestseller, a BookSense 76 Selection, a Publishers Weekly Daily pick, a selection of the *Writers Digest Book Club*, and a selection of many of *Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers*. His *A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation* (W.W. Norton, 2006 and Oxford University Press in the UK, 2007) was critically-acclaimed, a selection of the *Writers Digest Book Club* and the *Forbes Book Club*, was profiled on NPR, and is now part of the curriculum in over 50 universities and writing programs. As a way of giving back to the writing community, Mr. Lukeman gives away for free two of his books: *How to Write a Great Query Letter*, which was the #1 Bestselling title on Amazon Shorts for many months, and *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent*. He also maintains a blog, *Ask a Literary Agent*, where he gives away 200 pages of free information.

Noah has also worked as a collaborator, and is co-author, with Lieutenant General Michael "Rifle" Delong, USMC, Ret., of *Inside Centcom* (Regnery, 2005), a selection of the Military Book Club. His Op-Eds co-authored with General Delong appeared in the Sunday New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Dallas Morning News. He has contributed articles about the publishing industry and the craft of writing to several magazines, including Poets & Writers, *Writers Digest*, *The Writer*, the *AWP Chronicle* and the *Writers Market*, and has been anthologized in *The Practical Writer* (Viking, 2004).

Creatively, Noah is author of The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II, (Pegasus Books, 2008) an original play written in blank verse, which aspires to pick up where Shakespeare's Macbeth left off. Macbeth II was critically-acclaimed, and featured as recommended reading in New York Magazine's 2008 "Fall Preview." He has also written several screenplays, one of which, Brothers in Arms, was chosen as one of Hollywood's 100 Best Scripts of the Year on the 2007 Black List and is currently in development at a major studio.

Noah Lukeman has been a guest speaker on the subjects of writing and publishing in numerous forums, including Harvard University, the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, the graduate writing program at Stanford University, the graduate playwriting division of the Juilliard School, The Hotchkiss School, the Writers Digest Panel at Book Expo America, the MFA at Northern Michigan University, the National Society of Newspaper Columnist's annual Boston conference, George Mason's Fall for the Book Festival in Washington, D.C., writing conferences in New York City, Portland, Oregon, Seattle, San Diego, North Carolina, Columbus, Ohio, and in Riker's Island Penitentiary. He earned his B.A. with High Honors in English and Creative Writing from Brandeis University, cum laude. Noah also serves on the board of the BedStuy Campaign Against Hunger.

## Praise for Noah Lukeman's Books

### THE FIRST FIVE PAGES

"Novice and amateur writers alike will benefit from literary agent Lukeman's lucid advice in this handy, inexpensive little book. Carrying the craft of writing beyond Strunk and White's classic Elements of Style, this book should find a wide audience: public libraries sponsoring writers' groups and workshops will want multiple copies."  
--Library Journal (Highly Recommended)

"Intelligent, important, valuable and entertaining instructions....It should be read by all novice writers--and by those whose books are already published but intend to write more."

--Richard Marek, Former Editorial Director of Kirkus Reviews

"I have to tell you, [The First Five Pages] is one of the best [books] I've read. I've written (and seen published) pretty close to a dozen novels in as many years... but I wish I had read Lukeman's book when I began writing fiction. I'm glad I did now. It has helped, immediately....Lukeman's editorial eye is sharp. If every novelist and short story writer in this country had Lukeman as an editor, we'd have a lot more readable prose out there.... The First Five Pages should be on every writer's shelf. This is the real thing."

--Barnes & Noble Writers Workshop

"The difference between The First Five Pages and most books on writing is that the others are written by teachers and writers. This one comes from a literary agent--one whose clients include Pulitzer Prize nominees, New York Times bestselling authors, Pushcart Prize recipients, and American Book Award winners.... Lukeman has plenty of solid advice worth listening to. Particularly fine are his exercises for removing and spicing up modifiers and his remedies for all kinds of faulty dialogue."  
--Amazon.com Editorial Department (featured book)

"The First Five Pages is most useful in its guidance on preparing and submitting your work. Lukeman grinds his teeth over amateurish writing, too, and offers practical corrections."

--Detroit Free Press

"Here are two books about the craft of writing which, in our opinion, far surpass most books on that subject....The one that appealed more strongly to this reader (and closet writer) is literary agent Noah Lukeman's The First Five Pages."

--Taconic Syndicated Newspapers ("Must Reads")

"Noah Lukeman has compiled the ultimate writer's guide to staying out of the rejection pile....This is no ordinary writing book. Lukeman has stared at thousands of manuscripts, and he can pick out poor ones with a glance....Lukeman has done a great service to the writing community by providing this glimpse into the abyss.... The First Five Pages is worth its weight in gold, and should be read by all experienced and unpublished authors."

--InscriptionsMagazine.com

[one of Writer's Digest's 101 Best Sites for Writers]

"When you read The First Five Pages, you'll hope Noah Lukeman will one day teach us more. ...I don't usually praise books on writer's craft on my site...but The First Five Pages is exceptional... I read The First Five Pages in two sittings (and plan to read it again). I own about 100 books on craft...In my opinion, yours ranks among the best."

--Prairieden.com

[one of Writer's Digest's 101 Best Sites for Writers]

"Mr. Lukeman has written a definitive handbook on the pitfalls to avoid in your work.....The information contained within its covers will help you improve your technique and perhaps provide you with the tools to make your story leap off the pages. As writer, I found this book to be extremely useful....I highly recommend The First Five Pages to anyone who is serious about their writing."

Planet Showbiz (Featured selection)

"If you write fiction, this one is a must! Lukeman works his way from the most obvious to the most subtle, telling just what agents look for to give them an excuse to reject your manuscript."

--Homestead.com

## THE PLOT THICKENS

"THE PLOT THICKENS is one of the best-ever books about the craft of writing. It is a book that can change the world of every writer who embraces Lukeman's ideas. His classroom on paper should be on every writer's shelf to be read again and again. The book is a personal gift from a master agent who truly cares not only about the written word, but most of all, about the people who struggle to convey ideas upon the printed page."

—Authorlink

"Lukeman's advice is practical—and often entails multiple, time-consuming steps—without a hint of the flakiness that creeps into many writing guides. Though Lukeman works with books, he wisely asserts that the observations in this volume are applicable to all types of imaginary writing, from film to poetry. Indeed, it is a worthy addition to any writer's reference shelf."

--Publishers Weekly

"...a crisply written, nicely detailed examination of the art of storytelling. Beginning writers will find plenty of practical tips and useful advice in its pages"

--Booklist

"Lukeman's book succeeds because it takes a commonsense approach to plotting, one that centers on characters and a few basic elements such as conflict and suspense. THE PLOT THICKENS is a highly useful book that is written in an accessible style and filled with valuable examples. I recommend this for the aspiring novelist who needs a helpful guide to developing and creating vivid characters."

--The Writer

"For those of us who have ever grappled with plot, THE PLOT THICKENS is a godsend. I never tire of reading Noah Lukeman's work because his voice is eloquent, insightful, practical, original, and sincere. The man has respect for literature and it shows. There is information in Noah Lukeman's books I have not read elsewhere. The most veteran author can learn from THE PLOT THICKENS. Beginners will find a gold mine. I wish I could have read this book years ago. THE PLOT THICKENS is not the type of book you want to check out from the library or borrow from a friend. It is the type of book you need to purchase so it can sit on your desk, dog-eared and underlined, worn from years of overuse. For the playwright, the screenwriter, the novelist, or the short-story writer, THE PLOT THICKENS is more than a book on craft, it's a tool."

--Prairieden.com

"Conflict - the most difficult concept for new writers to understand. Lukeman does a masterful job of explaining this important aspect of plot development... Written with clarity, Lukeman never talks down to his reader. His personable writing style elevates THE PLOT THICKENS from a text on writing to a written version of the mentor you always wished you could have."

--The Midwest Book Review

"THE PLOT THICKENS is wonderful!"

--Writers Digest Book Club (Linda Walker, Editor)

"Fantastic book. Gives you lots of insight on how to write a great story. We at Hollywoodlitsales.com couldn't put it down. It was better than reading a great novel."

--Hollywoodlitsales.com

"In his book THE FIRST FIVE PAGES, Noah Lukeman, one of the top literary agents in New York, gave writers a great gift. Now, in THE PLOT THICKENS, he shows writers how to build stories in which the plot emerges from fresh, alive, and intense characters. Both beginners and more advanced writers will find many

wonderful, thought-provoking concepts and approaches here to help them hone their craft."

--James Frey, Author of How to Write a Damn Good Novel and The Key

## **A DASH OF STYLE**

"One of the Best Writing Books of the Year."

--The Writer

"AN INSTANT CLASSIC."

--International Bestseller M.J. Rose

What Writing Professors are Saying:

"PITHY, ELEGANT."

--Paul Cody, Ithaca College

"A PAGE TURNER."

--Brian Ascalon Roley, Miami University (Ohio)

"GENIUS."

--Dr. Peggy Brown, Colin County Community

"A MASTER CLASS."

--John Burt, Brandeis University

"FLAWLESS."

--John Smolens, Northern Michigan MFA

"SOMETHING TO

REALLY CELEBRATE!"

--Phyllis Moore, Kansas City Art Institute

"A DASH OF STYLE is a straightforward and thoughtfully written guide that will be useful to any writer who wants to gain better control over the tools of the craft. This is great, down-to-earth advice that never becomes overly prescriptive, from a guy who knows his business. I recommend it highly!"

--Dan Chaon, National Book Award Finalist, author of You Remind me of Me

"Here's a book that offers not only the mechanics of punctuation, but the means to make your writing soar."

--Alexander Steele

Dean of Faculty, Gotham Writers' Workshop

"I've read *A DASH OF STYLE* by Noah Lukeman: but I am far from done with it. This is not a rule book, neither is it a delightful series of stories about commas and colons. (Not that it's not delightful.) This is what we writers have been waiting for -- a book that takes the straight jacket off of punctuation and instead offers it up as a series of creative writing tools. Complete with exercises that make you think, rethink, consider and see your own work in a new light; Lukeman's wit and insight make this an instant classic."

--International Bestseller M.J. Rose, author of *The Delilah Complex*

"I've never seen punctuation elucidated in such a directly helpful manner. All creative writers, from the just-starting-out to the most stylistically sophisticated, will benefit from Lukeman's savvy advice in *A DASH OF STYLE*."

--Therese Eiben, former Editor of Poets & Writers, editor of *The Practical Writer*, Creative Writing teacher at William Patterson University

"*A DASH OF STYLE* is the contemporary book on the subject. It puts plunk down everything you need to know about punctuation in one place where you can find it."

--Carol Bly

legendary writing teacher and author of many critically-acclaimed books, including *Beyond the Writers Workshop* (Knopf)

"Noah Lukeman's witty, learned, and practical *A DASH OF STYLE* is a master class in the expressive uses of punctuation to organize and orchestrate the reader's felt experience of your thinking. The creative exercises at the end of each chapter are particularly astute ways of helping you develop a feel for the music of prose."

--John Burt

Professor of English and Creative Writing at Brandeis University, author of *The Way Down and Work Without Hope*

"One of the Best Writing Books of the Year."

--The Writer, December, 2006

"Lukeman offers literary examples from major writers like Mark Twain, while [Eats, Shoots & Leaves' Lynne] Truss dissects poorly punctuated public signs. The Writing Exercises ideas are Lukeman's best contribution, and particularly for these, this work is recommended for academic and large public libraries."

--Library Journal, May 15, 2006

Mr. Lukeman is giving away the enclosed three books for free, as a way of giving back to the writing community. We hope you read it, enjoy it, and prosper from it. If you wish, feel free to support Mr. Lukeman's other books:

also by Noah Lukeman

*The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile*

*The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life*

*A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*

*The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II: The Seed of Banquo*

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*Note: in the interest of grammatical simplicity, I opt to use “he,” which is of course meant to apply equally to “he” and “she.”*

# Contents

Introduction

## **PART I: YOU**

### **Chapter 1: Why You Need an Agent**

- 10 Reasons Not to Query Publishers Directly
- 10 Reasons Why You Need an Agent
- When to Query a Publisher Directly

### **Chapter 2: Preparing Your Manuscript**

- The Final Draft Rule
- Avoiding Quirky Formats
- Fiction versus Non-Fiction
- Aspects Unique to Fiction
- Aspects Unique to Non-Fiction
- The Non-Fiction Proposal
- Different Genres of Non-Fiction
- Memoir
- Can I Cross Over?

### **Chapter 3: How to Build Your Platform and Credentials**

- Fiction versus Non-Fiction
- Planning for a Longer Effort
- 8 Ways to Build Your Platform (for both Fiction and Non-Fiction)
- 9 Steps to Building Your Bio (for Fiction)
- The Importance of Getting Out There
- Before you Build Your Platform (Non-Fiction)
- 8 Ways to Build Your Non-Fiction Platform

## **PART II: THEM**

### **Chapter 4: How to Research Agents (35 Resources)**

- 13 Factors to Consider When Evaluating an Agent
- 24 Free Resources for Researching Agents
- 11 Fee-Based Resources for Researching Agents

### **Chapter 5: Your Approach**

- The 4 Musts of Submitting
- 3 Things Not to do When Submitting
- To Fed-Ex or Not to Fed-Ex?
- To E-Mail or Not to E-Mail?
- 6 Crucial Issues When Querying Via E-Mail

## **Chapter 6: The Art of Follow Up**

- How Long to Wait?
- 4 Keys to Successful Follow Up
- To Revise or Not to Revise?
- 4 Tools to Have at Your Disposal
- Why Rejection Doesn't Matter

## **Chapter 7: How to Protect Yourself**

- 3 Resources to Protect you from Agent Scams
- 5 Ways an Agent Can Take Advantage of You
- To Use a Book Doctor?
- The Agency Agreement
- 7 Ways to Protect Yourself in an Agency Agreement
- To Hire an Attorney?

## **PART III: AFTER THE STORM**

### **Chapter 8: How to Keep Your Agent (and When to Let Him Go)**

- What it's Like to Work With an Agent (a Step-by-Step Timeline)
- A Publication Timeline Chart
- The Agent's Role in the Timeline
- 15 Ways to Assure a Great Relationship With Your Agent
- What if Your Agent Quits?
- When to Let Your Agent Go
- 6 Reasons to Drop Your Agent

### **Chapter 9: Now What?**

- To Self Publish?
- Continue to Improve Your Craft
- Write Another Book
- Never Give Up

## Introduction

As a literary agent, I've come into contact with thousands of authors over the years, and I can't begin to tell you how many of them tell me the same story: they spent years completing their manuscript, approached the publishing industry, were rejected, and then gave up. When I ask them what their "approach" consisted of, they invariably tell me they sent their manuscripts to a handful of agents (usually about six) over the course of one or two years. Based on those few rejections, they deemed themselves to have been officially turned down by the publishing industry.

When I inquire further, I discover in nearly every case that these authors not only approached agents inappropriate for their work, but also approached them in an amateur, improper way. As a result, their writing was never read by a single publishing professional for whom it might be appropriate. After years of working on their manuscripts, after laboring over every word, these authors never gave themselves a chance.

After years of working hard on a manuscript, you might, understandably, be excited and eager to share it with the world; your first impulse will be to immediately get it onto the desks of those who might publish it. However, I assure you that rushing into the submission process will end up counteracting all of your hard work. Indeed, it never ceases to amaze me that writers will

spend several years working on their manuscripts, yet only a few hours sealing its fate by hastily choosing a list of agents out of a random (usually outdated) directory, or by the first, random website they happen to stumble upon.

There do indeed exist many incredibly talented authors who will never get published, for the sole reason that they do not know how to approach the industry in the right way. It is depressing—not because they've been rejected by the publishing industry (in reality, they haven't), but because a few simple tips could have saved them years of needless waiting, of putting their careers on hold—could have made the difference in their getting published. These simple, concrete tips are precisely what I will share with you in this book.

Before embarking on the journey of finding an agent, you must first have your query letter written, and in excellent shape. Writing the query letter is an art form in and of itself, and you'll often find conflicting advice, making it even harder to grasp. Entire books have been devoted to it, and I have written one myself, *How to Write a Great Query Letter* ([www.writeagreatquery.com](http://www.writeagreatquery.com)), which I give away for free. If you have not already, I advise you to download it.

You must also first prepare to set aside a good deal of time and energy for the process of landing an agent. It is indeed a process, and I know that most of you, after so many years spent toiling on your books, will be in a rush to get it out the door and into the hands of an agent. But you really must change

your mindset and be prepared to not rush this process. Hurrying to choose agents and mail your query letter may give you some instant gratification, but you will likely receive nothing but rejections, and weeks or months later, you will come to learn, the hard way, that your alacrity did you no good.

You set aside much time to creating your work—now set aside equal time to research and choose the right agents. Switch modes to private detective, and learn to savor the process. And do indeed prepare for a lengthy process. This mindset alone will put you head and shoulders above your peers, the vast majority of whom are rushing to query just about any agent they can find. This mindset will also enable you to soldier on in an unemotional, disciplined manner for weeks or months at a time if your agent search doesn't at first yield results. This mindset of steady endurance and persistence (absent in so many impatient authors) will alone make the difference in your landing that agent.

The advice you're about to read in these pages has been tried and tested over many years: I've dispensed it to thousands of authors around the world, and I have heard back from so many of them that it was directly responsible for their finally being able to land an agent. It will work for you, too, if you are prepared to truly study and apply the principles I lay out here. They are simple—but then again, the most effective principles always are.

Most of all, enjoy the journey!

PART I:

YOU

# Chapter 1:

## Why You Need an Agent

There will always be authors out there who insist that you don't need an agent, that you can just as easily query publishers directly and land a book deal by yourself. They will tell you that searching for an agent is a waste of time, and encourage you to follow their footsteps and approach publishers first. They may even back up their advice with that rare anecdote of the author who managed to land a deal all on his own.

Don't listen to them. There is a reason that the vast majority of published books have agents behind them—and, indeed a reason why the profession of “literary agent” exists to begin with. There are, in fact, so many reasons why you need to have an agent, I could fill this book with them. But I won’t. I’m going to limit this discussion to giving you 10 good reasons why you should never query a publisher directly, and 10 reasons why you need an agent. Hopefully by that point you will be convinced, and you will then be able to settle into your agent search even more seriously, whatever it takes.

### **10 Reasons Not to Query Publishers Directly**

## 1. You won't get read.

The vast majority of editors at major publishing companies won't even read a query letter unless it comes from an agent. You will end up getting up getting a form letter back either rejecting it or stating that they cannot read it unless you submit through an agent.

## 2. Submitting to publishers might hurt your chances of later landing an agent.

Querying publishers directly is potentially detrimental to a future relationship with an agent because if by some chance you actually manage to get the attention of an editor at a major publisher, and he rejects your work (as will likely happen), then you have just eliminated one potential editor/publisher from your future agent's submission list. If an editor rejects your manuscript, he rejects it on behalf of his entire publishing company (or imprint). Industry etiquette prevents agents from submitting the same work to two different editors at the same publisher, and thus your agent will not be able to re-approach any publisher that has already rejected you (even if it had been read by an inappropriate editor at that publisher). Thus you may narrow a legitimate agent's chance of success, which also means that that agent will be less likely to offer you representation.

### 3. You'll get a worse deal.

If by some remote chance your direct querying of a publisher is successful and they make you an offer, you will almost certainly end up being offered a lower advance and royalties than if you had been represented by an agent. From where you're sitting, you have no perspective on the industry, and you won't be in a position to know what a "big" or "small" deal is. If you try to negotiate and ask the publisher for better terms, they will likely just say No, since they know that you don't have an agent, and thus their offer is likely the only one you have. You have no leverage to negotiate.

### 4. You'll never know what other publishers would have offered.

A good agent will submit your book not just to one or two publishers, but to several—sometimes as many as three or four dozen publishers (or imprints) if the book warrants it. One of the major advantages of this is that you don't end up taking any one deal in a blind fashion, and you have the benefit of knowing what other publishers would have offered. For example, if you queried publishers directly and received an offer for a \$10,000 advance, you might have accepted it, not knowing that another publisher would have offered you \$50,000. If one editor likes your book enough to make an offer, there is a good chance that others would have too; but since you don't have

relationships with every publisher and imprint (as agents do), you won't be able to have your manuscript on the desks of dozens of other appropriate editors at the same time. Even in the case that an agent submits your book to 40 publishers and only one publisher offers \$10,000 and the other 39 turn it down, you can still at least accept the \$10,000 offer with peace of mind (which you wouldn't have on your own), and know for certain that there weren't better offers out there left unexplored.

##### 5. You'll get a worse contract.

The advance and royalties are just the starting points of any book deal. There are dozens of smaller deal points that are typically negotiated by an agent either at the time the deal is negotiated and/or once the contract is issued. These include subsidiary rights such as translation rights, audio rights, film rights, book club rights, and other important issues, too, such as the timing of when your advance is paid out, bonus clauses, and the all-important option on your next book. Without an agent, you will also be at a loss to understand the legalese of a book publishing agreement (some exceed 20 pages); even if you hire an attorney, most attorneys tend to miss contract issues inherent to the quirky book publishing industry, issues which only (good) agents know like the back of their hands.

## 6. You can ruin your relationship with your editor.

You want to be thought of by your editor as the talent, as the creative artist—not as the negotiator, the business-person, or as the nag. When you don't have an agent representing you, it falls on your shoulders to be the business-person, the lawyer, to negotiate for a better advance, to negotiate all of the contract issues; it falls on your shoulders to have to be the nag, to call and complain when you don't like the catalogue copy, or the jacket art. Any of this can easily strain your relationship with your editor. Instead of thinking of you as the talent, your editor might soon come to think of you as being a pain. The agent, though, acts as a buffer, dealing with all the business issues so that you don't have to. It enables your relationship with your editor to be clean, and to consist of only creative and editorial issues, which is how it should be.

## 7. You will be placed at the bottom of the priority stack.

If you make a deal without an agent, your book you will be at the bottom of your editor's priority list all the way through to publication. Most editors these days are forced by corporate policy to acquire and shepherd through to publication about 20 to 30 books a year. That's a lot of books for them to be juggling at any one time. Additionally, editors must compete with their editorial colleagues down the hall for the scarce resources of publicity, marketing, and the publisher's other departments. When an editor has 30 titles

to edit, publish and fight for, he is forced to prioritize. The books that have powerful agents behind them—especially agents who have other titles with that editor—will end up getting more attention. Decisions must be made, and most often, the unagented writers will fall to the bottom of the priority stack for publicity, advertising, galleys, publication dates, and a myriad other factors.

#### 8. You are only one voice.

There will come a time in the publishing process when something arises that is not to your liking and that is of supreme importance to you. It could be an editorial issue, or the catalogue copy, or the delayed publication date, or the fact that they won't print bound galleys, or the change of format from hardcover to paperback, or a sudden change of title. It could be anything (and more than one issue). At that moment, if you had had an agent, your first call would have been to him. It would have given you a chance to vent and complain to a third party, and could perhaps have prevented from acting rashly with your editor. A good agent should help calm you, and be the voice of reason.

Additionally, and more importantly, your agent could then join voices with you and advocate on your behalf. Agents are not magicians, and they won't always be able to get everything changed to your liking—but two voices are always stronger than one.

9. You will be orphaned if your editor quits.

The publishing industry tends to be an unstable one, and editors move about all the time. It is unfortunately quite common for the editor who acquired your book to quit (or be fired) before your book actually publishes. This is due partly to the fact that the publishing process is a slow one, with it taking on average 18 months for your manuscript to be published from the time it was delivered, and up to 36 months if your manuscript was bought based just upon a brief proposal. Thus it is all too common for the person who was the in-house champion of your book to suddenly depart, leaving you to be assigned a random editor. Sometimes this random editor will end up being a nice fit, but more often than not this editor will not share the same enthusiasm (or vision) for your book as the one who originally acquired and championed it. He might also be a bit resentful at having been assigned your book, at having to “inherit” a book which he never wanted to publish and which suddenly adds to his already-overflowing workload. When this new editor discovers that you don’t have an agent, he might feel more at liberty to cancel your book for editorial reasons—or at the very least, to put you at the bottom of his priority stack. He may also be less likely to want to buy your next book.

10. You will be orphaned if your first book doesn't perform.

If your book publishes and doesn't do well, you will have a bad track record, which means your editor will probably not want to buy your second book. This also means that it will be much harder to get an agent to represent you. If you had had an agent to begin with, you would have already had a loyal agent in your corner who has a vested interest in you: he would stay with you through this tough time and help you to try to find another publisher. By having an agent during a good time, you (usually) assure yourself an agent in bad times as well.

### **10 Reasons Why You Need an Agent.**

1. An agent will make sure your work is truly ready to be seen by publishers.

In your haste to submit your query or manuscript directly to publishers, you may think your work is ready to show—when in fact it might not be. Not only do you need an outside perspective, you particularly need the impartial perspective of an industry professional. You only get one shot at being read by a publisher. An agent's reputation is on the line when he submits a manuscript on behalf of an author, so he is not going to let it out there unless it's in the best possible shape. This might entail your revising your manuscript

repeatedly, or even entail an entire change in concept or title. You would not have the benefit of any of this if you had queried a publisher directly.

## 2. An agent will get you read by the right people.

Not only will an agent get you read at a publishing company, but he will get you read by the right imprints, by the maximum number of imprints, and by the right people within those imprints. As an industry outsider, you may not know every imprint within every publishing company, or how these imprints differ from one another, or what each imprint is known for, or what each imprint is looking to acquire at the moment. For example, the Knopf imprint of Random House acquires literary work, while the Bantam imprint of Random House acquires commercial work. If you hadn't known this and submitted your literary work to Bantam, you would be wasting your time. And if you didn't know every imprint at Random House, then you wouldn't be able to submit your query to as many publishers, and will thus greatly decrease your chances of getting published. Agents know all of this, and will make sure that, instead of your being submitted to 5 inappropriate imprints, you are submitted to 20 appropriate ones.

Additionally, agents also know precisely which editors within these imprints will be the most likely ones to want to acquire your work. I cannot emphasize enough how important this. As I mentioned before, industry

etiquette dictates that you only get to choose one editor to submit your work to at each publisher or imprint. That choice of person is absolutely vital. If Harpercollins, for example, employs 10 editors who are all acquiring fiction, then some of these editors might have overlapping tastes. How do you know which one to choose? Agents have lunches with editors every day, and spend hours on the phone with them. It is their job—indeed, it is among the most important aspects of their job—to know precisely which editors are looking for what *right now*. Choosing editor A instead of editor B at Harpercollins can all make all the difference in your getting a deal—or your getting rejected.

Do you wish to spend eight hours a day, seven days a week for the next five years learning who every editor is, and what his current tastes are? If so, then you should become an agent yourself. If not, then continue to search for one.

3. Who submits a manuscript is nearly as important as the content itself. I have heard stories of editors who acquired a particular manuscript not because they thought it was great in its own right, but rather because they wanted to be in business with the (powerful) agent representing it. The context in which something is read is often as important as what is being read. If a powerful agent has proven time and again that he only represents excellent manuscripts, then when he calls, an editor will take his call

immediately, and might even stop everything and read it that second. More importantly, the editor will read the manuscript with excitement and optimism, with a positive eye, with an expectation of liking it. That doesn't mean he will necessarily buy it—but it sure beats an editor's reading an unsolicited, anonymous manuscript from the slush pile and having every expectation of hating it.

#### 4. An agent can time a bidding war.

Not only can an agent get your manuscript out to the maximum number of publishers and imprints (thus make sure you are getting the best deal), but by doing so he can sometimes also take it one step further and coordinate a bidding war. This could come in the form of his setting a formal auction closing date and time, or of his accepting a “floor” offer, or of his accepting a preemptive offer (a “preempt”) from a publisher for the privilege of taking your book off the table before others have a chance to bid. Some books are sold within 24 hours or less this way, and these can sometimes yield the largest advance offers. None of this would be remotely possible by your querying a few random publishers directly.

#### 5. An agent can negotiate the fine print of your publishing agreement.

Most good agents have done deals with almost every publisher and imprint, and as a result they have a “boilerplate” contract on file at every publisher. For example, this means that after I land a book deal for an author at Publisher A, their legal department simply pulls up the Lukeman boilerplate, and, as a starting point, my author already gets dozens of small contract points changed to his favor, changes that I’ve worked to cumulatively negotiate over the last 13 years. And this is just a starting point; every contract will also have its own additional issues to negotiate.

As I mentioned above, the negotiation of the advance and royalties are just a starting point, and an agent will be instrumental in also negotiating the dozens of other small deal points that go into a publishing deal. For example, on your own you might agree to a Translation rights split of 50/50 between Author and Publisher, whereas an agent might have been able to get you a split of 75/25 in your favor. If your Publisher sells Translation rights to Germany, for example, for a \$100,000 advance, then your agent having negotiated your split to 75 instead of 50 percent will have just made you an additional \$25,000. And if your U.S. advance was only \$5,000 to begin with, then that seemingly small point in the contract has, in reality, made you five times more than your entire U.S. advance. Don’t underestimate the small print. Agents don’t, and that’s another reason you need one.

6. An agent is a buffer for unpleasant business issues.

An agent acts as a buffer for all of the unpleasant business and legal issues which arise throughout the course of your writing and publishing a book. As I mentioned above, having an agent will preserve your relationship with your editor, as it will allow you to only have to discuss editorial issues with him. But an agent also acts as a buffer for any and all other business-related issues which might arise throughout the course of a book's life, which might not always be related to the publishing house, whether it's a publicity issue, for example, or a legal issue. An agent is there to give you counsel and guidance as these issues arise, and in many cases can help intervene and make sure it goes smoothly. Having an agent allows you to focus on being the artist.

Writing is not a business, but I assure you that publishing a book is, and if you don't want to have to become a businessperson in the process, then having an agent is the best thing you can do.

7. Good agents represent other authors who might prove useful to you.

An agent might have a list of thirty or more authors he represents—and if he works at a large agency, there may be several hundred authors represented by that agency as a whole. This network could prove instrumental in helping launch your career. Let's say, for example, that you really want an endorsement from a particular author, and your agent (or his agency)

represents him: in most cases your agent can at least make the introduction, and the chances of your receiving the endorsement will probably be greater than if you or your publisher had approach this author cold. Your agent's other authors might also, for example, teach at universities, in which case they might be helpful in landing you a teaching job; or they might sit on the councils of award committees; or they might be part of a writing organization that has a stipend to invite other authors to come speak. If it is a diverse agency, they might even represent other clients who have their own national radio or television shows, and who might be open to inviting you on. One never knows—but having a network is certainly better than not having one.

#### 8. An agent can make a major impact on your subsidiary rights sales.

As I mentioned above, landing a book deal is just a starting point: there are numerous secondary (“subsidiary”) rights that can be sold with any given book. These include translation rights, dramatic rights, book club rights, audio rights, and many others. Not only can an agent negotiate your contract percentage of these rights to be as high as possible, but in many cases, an agent can retain some of these rights on your behalf, and be directly responsible for selling them. For example, when making the deal, an agent might negotiate that the publisher controls World rights, or he might negotiate that he, the agent, controls them. If the agent controls them, then he will

distribute your book to his co-agents around the world, and they, in turn, will attempt to sell the rights to your book to publishers in their territories.

Sometimes agents and their co-agents can be even more effective at selling these rights than publishers, in which case your having an agent can mean more subsidiary rights income for you. More importantly, if an agent retains these rights, then when the deal is made, the money goes directly to you, instead of its being allocated into your publisher's royalty account (which means you will never receive that money if you don't earn back your advance).

In this one way alone, having an agent can potentially mean a huge difference in the amount of money you receive, and when you receive it.

Additionally, if the publisher retains control of the subsidiary rights and if you have an agent, then that agent can provide oversight, and check in with the publisher's subsidiary rights department to make sure they are aggressively shopping the rights to your book. With hundreds of titles to work on, a publisher's subrights department has to make priorities, and your title can get overlooked.

Additionally, agents traditionally negotiate to retain control of the film and television rights to your book, and they often use their co-agents in Hollywood to aggressively try to sell these rights on your behalf. If you don't have an agent, either the publisher will try to retain these rights, and/or you may not have any connections to film agents to shop them on your behalf.

Again, in this one way alone, having an agent can potentially mean a huge difference in your income.

Not to mention any other rights that might come your way. Good agents are very well connected in all areas of the industry. On any given day, one never knows who might come knocking on an agent's door to inquire about acquiring rights to a book, whether it's for an audio or film deal or software deal—or a deal for some emerging technology. These people often come knocking because of the agent's or agency's reputation, or because of the agent's other clients—not because of you. But your agent can also use this opportunity to raise awareness about your book, and as a result, a sale might ensue—a sale which would have never ensued had you not had an agent to begin with.

#### 9. An agent provides continuity when an editor quits.

As I mentioned above, if your editor should quit and a new editor takes over, if you don't have an agent, you can find yourself in a precarious situation. But if you have an agent and your editor quits, it is an entirely different scenario. With an agent in the picture, the publisher will think carefully about who to assign your book to; furthermore, the agent may step in and influence the publisher to assign your book to an editor he knows would be best for you. There may be other editors at that publisher who the agent

has a relationship with, and he might try to make sure one of them inherits your book. This can turn a negative into a positive. At the very least, your having an agent will provide a much smoother transition for all concerned. It will also help make sure that your book continues to remain a priority in-house, and it will increase the chances of the new editor wanting to buy your next book.

#### 10. An agent is there for you when a publisher drops you.

As I mentioned above, if your published book doesn't perform well in the marketplace, most publishers will not want to buy your next book. Indeed, it can be even harder to get published if you have a bad track record than if you had never been published at all. If you had never been published, at least there is a blank slate, a big question mark of how your books will sell. If you publish and sell poorly, however, that information is recorded in all the computers, and you will be branded as not selling well. Thus it is not uncommon for a publisher to drop an author after their book does not sell well.

Having an agent cushions the shock in such a scenario. An agent will be in place to take the rejected book and shop it around to other publishers. If he is successful, the author can immediately find himself with a brand new publisher and editor—and sometimes even with a better editor, and for a bigger advance. If an agent is not successful in landing you another deal

immediately, the agent can still be with you in the long run, helping you to come up with new concepts and shopping those when they are ready.

The important thing to realize in all of this is that, these days, the long term relationship for most authors is with the agent, not the publisher/editor. There are some authors I've represented who have had 6 publishers (and twice as many editors) over the course of 10 years. I have been the one constant in their career. While the publishers drop them when they don't perform, I stay with them, time and again, through all the rejections, helping them come up with new concepts, helping them find new publishers. This is true of all good agents—and is yet another reason why, when venturing out to try to get published, your search must really begin with the agent.

### **When to Query a Publisher Directly.**

All of this said, we must take into account that not every author has the same ambition to write a mainstream book which will be published by a major publisher. If so, there are a few (rare) exceptions when an author will want to query a publisher directly. If, for example, you are writing poetry, then agents rarely will want to represent a poetry collection, and thus you are going to have to query publishers on your own. If your book is only intended for a local or regional audience, then you will need to target small, regional

publishers, and many agents won't represent these. If your book is very niche or technical and is best suited for a small press, or if you wish to only be published by one, then again, agents will rarely want to work on such a book. If your book is very academic, then you will need to find a university press, and agents will rarely represent these. The types of publishers who publish all of these books are also more open to direct submissions from authors than the mainstream, trade publishers, so you will find them more receptive. (Don't make the mistake, though, of assuming that some very fine smaller publishers—like Graywolf or Soho Press—fall into this category and are thus easier to submit to without an agent. This is not the case. They are small, but they still receive mostly agented submission. We are only talking about *truly* small publishers.)

I hope that by now you are convinced that you do truly need an agent, and that your search must begin here. You probably had some sense of this already (having bought this book), but now I hope you fully understand all the reasons why, and can rest assured that that is the case. This is important to know, because when the agent search gets long and hard, you might wonder at some point if you should just give up and turn to publishers directly.

Now let's turn to the next step in the process: making sure your manuscript is truly ready to be seen.

## Chapter 2:

# Preparing Your Manuscript

Before you begin to research and approach agents, there are a few things that you must do in advance. One of the most important is making sure that your manuscript or proposal (let's just call it your "work") is absolutely, positively in the best possible shape it can be.

### **The Final Draft Rule.**

As a rule, don't ever send in first drafts—don't send in fifth drafts. Send in 20<sup>th</sup> or 40<sup>th</sup> drafts. Don't send in work that hasn't first been read and critiqued by impartial readers. Don't send in incomplete manuscripts, unfinished works, thoughts, sketches, concepts.

There have been too many times when I've received letters like this:

"Dear Mr. Lukeman: I've just finished the first (very rough) draft of my novel. It's not really finished, but I need another set of eyes to look it over and tell me if it's any good. What is your reading schedule like? Can you read it tomorrow?"

"Dear Mr. Lukeman: I have the potential to be a great writer. I've just finished my first novel. I know it will need a lot of editing, though. Can you do that?"

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: I have set out to write a 2,000 page fantasy novel. The first 20 pages are in great shape, and I am ready to show them to you. I haven’t written the other 1,980, but I am confident that once you read the first 20, you will know exactly where it’s going. Ready to do business together?”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: I have an amazing concept for a thriller. All it needs now is the perfect writer to help me get my thoughts on paper. Want to represent me?”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: I am in search of collaborator to sit down with me and record my life story of 20 years as a farmer. I know it will be a big bestseller and I want to let you in on it early. Who do you have in your rolodex? When can I stop by your office?”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: I was in the Army for 20 years. Got great stories to tell. Can’t write worth a dime, but I’m sure you could. Ready to write it for me?”

Agents are not collaborators. Agents are not matchmakers. Agents are not editors. Agents are not brainstorming partners. Agents are agents. They are there to get you a deal—not to write, revise, or edit your book. If an agent is receiving 10,000 or more manuscripts a year (as many agents do) and he must choose only one, then he is looking for any reason he can to reject. If 9,900 of the manuscripts that arrive are already in perfect shape, and yours is not, then he has found his reason.

This is not to say that agents will never revise, or help you brainstorm, or help you shape a concept. If you are an established client, and the agent is so inclined, this may very well be the case. Some agents love to edit, some don't; some are very capable editors, while others don't know how, and are solely businesspeople or attorneys. And it is possible that in some (rare) cases an agent can get so excited by a query, or concept, or sample pages that he does indeed want to help you shape it, or help you find a collaborator. But this is the exception. In the vast majority of cases, especially in the initial query phase, if your manuscript or proposal is not in absolute final form, it will hurt your chances severely.

It is important that you not view the process of your finding representation as a dialogue, that you not expect a back and forth with agents as they help you get your work into shape. Querying an agent is not a dialogue: it is a one way conversation. You are pitching them with the absolute best pitch you have, and with an absolutely finished work, and they are saying Yes or No. End of conversation.

### **Avoiding Quirky Formats.**

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: I am putting together an anthology and 50 of my friends have contributed an essay. But I haven't received permission from any of them. I assume that won't be a problem?”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: My first novel is 3,000 pages, and must be shipped in three oversized cartons. What is your mailing address?”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: My book on how to garden is absolutely brilliant, but to really get my point across, every fourth page must be a pop up, and every third page must slide out. Consider it a moving-parts gardening book. Ready for something different?”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: My autobiography is special because I’ve interspersed my sketches on every page. I’ve also included 300 photos of my original paintings, which I expect to be spread out through every chapter.”

“Dear Mr. Lukeman: Since I was an audio engineer for so many years of my life, I’ve taken a unique angle to my proposed book: my proposed book will have audio recordings implanted on every page. And since I worked in special effects, too, I also insist that the cover to be holographic.”

It’s hard enough to land a book deal—don’t make it harder on yourself by setting out to write a book in some quirky format which is not industry standard. That means, for example, don’t submit a 100 page novel, or a 1,000 page novel. The average manuscript for a novel comes in anywhere between 250 to 400 manuscript pages. In most cases, it is pretty safe to say that it should not be shorter than 200 manuscript pages (approximately 50,000 words), and not longer than 500 manuscript pages (approximately 125,000 words). If so, it will likely raise a red flag for an agent, and might make him

less likely to represent you. There are exceptions, of course (there are always exceptions), and I have indeed landed a six figure deal for a novel as short as 150 manuscript pages. But again, this is the exception, not the norm, particularly for a first novel. (Once you are an established author, there can be more leniency.)

If this seems too strict, keep in mind that the publishing industry as a whole is much more lenient with manuscript page count than Hollywood is: in Hollywood, the screenplay must be 120 pages, and if it is even a few pages off, it is automatically considered “short” or “long”—so much so, that the first thing a Hollywood executive does is turn to the last page. If it comes in at 130 or more, some executives will not even read it. Book publishing is not nearly as strict, but that doesn’t mean you should take advantage of its relative leniency. Do your best to fall within the range of normalcy.

To speak to a bigger issue, it is rare for a first novel to truly *need* to be over 500 or less than 200 manuscript pages. 99% of the time, these sort of page counts will point to the fact that there is something off with the author’s execution. If this is the case, you might want to reconsider whether your novel has too many characters, too many settings, too many subplots, or conversely, whether it is lacking a more robust cast of characters or more intricate subplots.

## **Fiction versus Non-Fiction.**

I have met many authors who told me that they spent years completing their 400 page non-fiction manuscript only to have it unanimously rejected by agents and publishers. It is a shame, because if they had read what I am about to say, they could have saved themselves years of effort:

Never complete a non-fiction manuscript in advance of selling it.

The standard non-fiction book deal is made based off of a proposal and sample chapters—not based off of a finished manuscript. As an author of non-fiction, you need only write a proposal and one or two sample chapters (a total of about 30 to 50 pages). If it doesn't sell, you've only wasted a few months writing, as opposed to a few years writing the entire manuscript.

Conversely, I've met novelists who managed to get agents interested in their novel, but only had the first chapter complete when they queried. The agents requested to see the rest, and the novelists hadn't written it yet. As a result, the agents said to get back in touch when the novel was finished. Years later, the author did. But by then the agent had lost interest. Needs change constantly in the publishing industry, and an agent looking to represent a certain type of novel one year might have no interest the next. If this novelist had finished his novel first before querying, he may have just landed an agent out the gate.

These two stories should help illustrate how different the worlds of fiction and non-fiction are in the publishing industry. There really is a big divide: many editors, for example, are only allowed by their publisher to acquire either fiction or non-fiction; many publishers and imprints will publish only fiction or non-fiction. Editors of non-fiction tend to lunch with agents of non-fiction, and the same holds true with fiction. There are circles within circles in the publishing industry. You, as the author, must realize there is a stark divide, and never assume that the same rules that apply to fiction also apply to non-fiction. The more you pay attention to the detailed, specific rules which apply to each genre, the greater your likelihood of your landing a deal.

### **Aspects Unique to Fiction.**

I frequently receive query letters from authors who have already published many works on non-fiction and whom, as a result, assume that they have a major advantage in getting their work of fiction published. This is not the case. Fiction is the great equalizer: whether you are an accomplished attorney, a brilliant surgeon, or a critically-acclaimed, published author of non-fiction, none of this has any bearing on your ability to write fiction. You will ultimately only be judged by what's on the page, and it must speak for itself.

If you are writing fiction, first make sure that your novel is finished (and of course, in its final draft), and secondly, make sure that you target and

approach agents who specifically represent fiction, and who specifically represent your genre and type of fiction (more on this in Chapter Four).

I frequently get asked about short story collections. Is there a market? Can they be sold? The answer is yes: in fact, the first deal I ever made as a literary agent was for an unpublished author's first story collection. However, that deal was a two book deal, for the story collection and for a novel-to-come, and this is usually the key to selling most short story collections: they tend to be much more sellable if there's a first novel that can be sold along with it. So if you have a finished story collection, consider taking time before you submit it to come up with a concept for a novel, ideally a detailed synopsis, or even better, some sample chapters or the finished manuscript. Novels are ultimately much more attractive for acquiring editors, and story collections, when they are bought, are often bought as a way to lock in an aspiring novelist before he takes off.

### **Aspects Unique to Non-Fiction.**

If you are writing non-fiction, first of all: congratulations. Your chances of landing an agent—and subsequently a book deal—are much greater. The vast majority of authors query for fiction, and thus a non-fiction query letter stands out immediately, just by virtue of being non-fiction. Additionally, it is always easier for an agent to get an immediate fix on a non-fiction query, since he can

quickly and easily identify the genre and concept. This will make it easier for the agent to market it to publishers, easier for publishers to market it to bookstores, and easier for bookstores to sell it to customers. It also makes it easier for you to research your genre, to know your precise competition, and to know where your book falls within the marketplace.

Not to mention it will be easier for you to research an agent, and to know exactly which agents sell books similar to yours (more on this later, in Chapter Four). Additionally, you need only prepare a 30 page proposal (as opposed to a 300 page manuscript) before querying. Non-fiction is easier in every sense of the word.

### **The Non-Fiction Proposal.**

Unlike fiction, which requires a finished manuscript, non-fiction only requires a professional book proposal, which is far shorter—but which comprises many unique elements. Entire books have been devoted to the art of the non-fiction book proposal, and if you are writing non-fiction, you might want to consider browsing them. But here I will give you a brief overview of what a non-fiction book proposal entails, and how to make it stand out from the pack.

There are three major elements to the standard non-fiction proposal:

1) An Overview. This can be anywhere from 1-5 pages. It describes the overall concept of the book, and should do so in a way which is compelling. It is really part sales letter, as it must make the case for why the book should exist at all, why there is a market, and why you should be the one to write it. I have seen overviews as short as one paragraph and as long as 30 pages. Generally, they should average about two or three pages.

2) A Chapter Outline. This can be anywhere from 3-10 pages. Essentially an annotated table of contents, it should offer a brief description (ranging from one paragraph to an entire page) of each chapter, broken down chapter by chapter. It should give a step by step plan for exactly how you will go about executing your concept, and give a feel of the overall structure and progression of the book. Generally, it ranges around 5 pages. Again, it should not simply be dry description but also should also make the case for your book as it goes.

3) A sample chapter. This can be anywhere from 10-30 pages. This is your actual writing sample, and shows agents and editors if you can actually write. It gives them a real feel for the tone and style of the book. Basically, it is your chance to prove that you can translate the dry summary of your chapter outline into vibrant, exciting writing. The logic is that if your sample chapter is

well-written, the rest of the book will be, too; thus, a good sample chapter will make editors feel less fearful about paying you money up front for a book which hasn't yet been written.

Sometimes authors include two or three sample chapters, although this isn't always necessary. It can be helpful, though, if your book varies in tone and subject matter, or if you want to give editors a feel for the different sections. Remember, the sample chapter(s) you include should be the very best the book has to offer (they need not necessarily be the first, or last, or chronological chapters). Generally, a sample chapter ranges around 15 pages.

In addition to the three major elements described above, there are also smaller sections that tend to be included in most book proposals. These include: About the Author, The Competition, The Market (for the book), and Execution and Delivery Time. If you decide to include any of the above, they should range from one paragraph to one page. If you decide to include an Introduction or Foreword before the Sample Chapter, generally don't let it exceed 10 pages.

DO: Number every page consecutively, preferably in the upper right hand corner; include a header identifying what section you're in (optional), preferably in the upper left hand corner; refer to your title in either ALL CAPS or italics.

DO NOT: Number or put a header on the first page; put a line space between paragraphs; single space; insert a dedication or acknowledgments page; try to pitch or market your book with laudatory adjectives (just state impressive facts without pitching yourself in an obvious way).

There may be other miscellaneous flourishes, too, geared specifically for your project. For instance, if it's a cookbook, you need to include recipes; if it's a highly-illustrated coffee-table book, you'll need to include sample photographs; if it's a technical or reference book, you might want to include a few diagrams or charts, etc.

When querying, some agents will ask that you query them with just a one page query letter, while others will request a synopsis and chapter outline, or sometimes the entire proposal. Every agent's needs are different. This is why it's important that you have the entire proposal completed before querying anyone. When in doubt, query with just a one page query letter.

## **What Type of Non-Fiction?**

“Non-fiction” is a broad category, and can mean many things. For example, if you have written a cookbook, there will be different requirements (recipes, etc.) than if you have written a serious work of history (sources, etc.). In general, highly practical and prescriptive categories of non-fiction, such as parenting, psychology, diet, fitness and health, tend to warrant a similar

marketing approach. The proposal should emphasize how such a book can help the reader, how a reader can easily use and implement the techniques and possibly emerge as a changed person as a result. Having a structure or plan (i.e., “8 Weeks to a Stronger Body” or “30 Days to Peace of Mind” or “7 Steps to a Behaved Child”) will be important.

When querying about serious narrative non-fiction, though, such as works of biography, history and current affairs, there won’t be any talk of how such a book can help the reader. Rather, there should be an emphasis on the author’s credentials, on his scholarly background, and on his extensive research. And there obviously won’t be any mention of a program, steps or a plan.

## **Memoir.**

Memoir falls into a class by itself. It is the only exception to the general rule of non-fiction versus fiction since, while it is non-fiction, it is treated as if it were fiction when it comes to querying and marketing. As with fiction, you will have to emphasize characters, plot, setting—all of the issues pertinent to fiction. Likewise, the market and competition won’t matter, as it is a unique work. For all intents and purposes, when writing memoir, ignore the rules outlined for non-fiction, and follow those for fiction. (Incidentally, the rules about non-fiction being easier to sell also disappear when it comes to memoir—it is as hard to sell as fiction.)

## Can I Cross Over?

While there are very stark lines drawn in the sand between fiction and non-fiction, and while having talent with one in no way indicates you'll have talent with the other, there is always that rare author who turns out to be equally talented (and successful) in both. There are also rare exceptions when an author spends years writing non-fiction, has little or no success, switches to fiction, and publishes a major bestseller. There have also been those rare authors who struggled for years with small advances for literary fiction, only to find themselves turning to non-fiction and landing major advances. And there are rare cases of authors who have switched genres within fiction, switching from literary to commercial fiction, or switched genres within non-fiction, switching, for example from writing about sports to writing about spirituality, and, after years of frustration, suddenly find themselves with major success.

These cases are rare, and I don't want to encourage you to believe that if you run out and switch genres you will suddenly strike gold. But there always exceptions, and thus I wouldn't want to proclaim as a blanket rule that every author must always be confined to writing just non-fiction or just fiction. So I want to encourage you to stop a moment and expand your notion of what it means to be an author. If you are a literary novelist, for example, would you still find satisfaction authoring books if they were non-fiction? Non fiction is

far easier to sell than fiction, and in some cases, making the switch might be what finally lands you that deal. Conversely, if you have been writing only non-fiction, is it possible that you might also have talent as a novelist? While it is rare, I have witnessed some authors switch to fiction and find huge success.

In any case, keep in mind that if you do finally land an agent, it is likely that if he signed you based on your querying him with a novel then he will only want to represent you for fiction, and if he signed you based on your querying him with non-fiction, then he will only want to represent you for non-fiction. If he signed you for non-fiction and you approach him two years later with a finished novel, he will likely let you know he is not interested in representing it, and that you'll need to go out and find another agent just for that. He might recommend you to another agent within his agency, or if it is a small agency, he might have to suggest you look for another agency altogether.

This can get a little tricky, because in the publishing industry, the etiquette is that agents represent authors exclusively, because it can take many years to build an author's career, and having an author represented by multiple agents can become infinitely complicated. Agents can thus be territorial, and some may be unhappy with your being simultaneously represented by another agency, even if it is for a different genre, and may insist that they represent you for all of your works (even if they won't shop your fiction or non-fiction).

If this is the case, you will have to decide how effective this agent has been for you, and whether it's worth it to take a chance elsewhere.

Now that we have made sure that your manuscript (or proposal) is in the best possible shape, and have taken into account all of the unique aspects of a fiction versus a non-fiction submission, let's turn to the next step on the road to approaching an agent: making sure your bio and credentials are in the best possible shape.

## Chapter 3:

### How to Build your Platform and Credentials

Tens of thousands of new books are published each year, and it's increasingly hard for publishers to get attention and publicity for their books in the crowded marketplace. Chances are slim that a potential book buyer will walk into a seven-story Barnes & Noble and, by mere browsing, stumble across your title. The only time this may happen is if your book has just published and if your publisher has paid for its placement in the front window, or the front of the store. Even then, such placement tends to only last for a few weeks.

Thus the way most books sell is not due to browsing but rather due to a book buyer deliberately seeking out your book. And the reason someone would deliberately seek out a book is because he heard of it—and that means either word of mouth (which you can't control) or publicity (which you can). TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, websites—this is what drives book sales. If an author is able to get access to this publicity, if he already has a venue in place to promote his book, this is known as an author's "platform."

“Platform” is a common and important term in the publishing industry, so you should familiarize yourself with it now. It often means the difference between an author’s landing a deal or not. If two authors have written competing parenting proposals, for example, and the content is equally good, and one of them has a radio show which reaches one million people a week and the other doesn’t, then the one with the radio show will likely land the deal while the other does not. This might even be the case if the author with the radio show’s content was not as good.

It is unfortunate, but not every book deal is made based upon the quality of the content alone. It is always a combination. I have seen (and represented) countless submissions where the content was outstanding but the platform was non-existent, and as a result, the book was never bought. Publishers will tell you that it’s just too hard for them to “break out” an author in a competitive genre without his having a major platform. Publishers aren’t interested in spending years building a platform for an author—they want authors who already have platforms in place. And they have the luxury of picking and choosing them, since authors with major platforms approach the industry every day.

There are all types of platforms, major and minor. Minor ones offer a foundation on which an author can build in the future, but ultimately, minor platforms don’t influence a publisher to buy a book, and for marketing

purposes, are often equated with having no platform at all. Major platforms, though, can indeed make the difference in convincing a publisher to buy a book. A monthly column in a local newspaper would be considered a minor platform. A daily column in a national, syndicated newspaper, however, would be a major one. Speaking ten times a year to an average crowd of 200 is a minor platform. Speaking fifty times a year to an average crowd of 1,000 is major. Having a website and an email list of 5,000 people is minor. Having videos with 10 million views on youtube and an e-zine which reaches one million readers is major. Monthly appearances on a local radio show would be minor. Weekly appearances on a national radio show would be major—and hosting your own national radio show would be even more significant. The same holds true with TV appearances. The most highly valued platforms consist of steady, established, guaranteed appearances, while authors who appear on shows (even national ones) only sporadically and inconsistently are not considered to have strong platforms, because these appearances can't be counted on at publication time.

Remember, major book publishers always strive to publish on a national level, not locally or regionally. Acquiring editors are some of the most jaded people in the world, as all day long they are pitched proposals by authors who have major platforms. They have acquired and published books by authors who have major platforms and watched as many of these books published and

*still* did not sell well in the marketplace. Editors (and agents) have truly seen it all, and any platform which is not truly major will not impress them. You need to be able to prove to agents that you're out there in a substantial and sustained enough way to be able to sell books when the time comes. For example, if an author speaks to 500,000 people a year, then he will be virtually guaranteed a book deal, provided he can come up with a somewhat credible subject; there will be much less pressure on his concept or credentials, or even the content. If Howard Stern or Oprah want to write a book, they will have a deal waiting for them, regardless. No one will ask them for their credentials, and frankly, no one will be tough on the concept or even content of the book. In this case, the platform alone has made the book deal.

Many authors agonize over their lack of platform or author credentials, and for good reason. The publishing industry is brutally competitive, and if you think that lacking a platform or a strong author bio means you won't get paid serious attention to, in most cases, unfortunately, you're right. This is especially the case when it comes to non-fiction.

But don't despair. If you're staring at a blank space on the bio section of your query letter, if you have no platform whatsoever, contrary to popular belief, there are steps you can take to rectify this.

## **Fiction versus Non-Fiction.**

The issues at stake when it comes to an author's credentials and platform are different for fiction and non-fiction. When it comes to fiction (and memoir) you are given a bit of a break, inasmuch as your platform is not as much of a central issue. (Of course it still helps if you have a major platform, but the fiction world is much more forgiving.) No one will necessarily expect you to have a platform, and no one will reject your work because of this. If the writing is good enough, you will eventually get published. However, in the fiction world, instead of the platform, the author's bio, background and fiction-specific credentials are of much weight (we'll explore this in depth below).

In the non-fiction world (excepting memoir), platform is all important. This is particularly true of practical, prescriptive non-fiction categories, such as parenting, psychology and spirituality. (If you are writing narrative non-fiction or serious history or biography, you will be given a bit of a break on your platform, but at the same time, your credentials will become much more important.) Who you can reach is just as important as your content and credentials. If you have a great message and great credentials but can't reach anyone, then you will probably not land a book deal. On the other hand, if your platform is major but your credentials are not as strong, you might be forgiven. (We will explore this in-depth below.)

## **Your Competition**

I routinely receive query letters from writers who have already published several books with major publishers. Some of these are critically acclaimed, some even bestsellers. Even these authors are still searching for agents. I don't say this to depress you, but to make you aware. Knowledge is the first step in crafting the right approach. If you had never boxed a day in your life, you wouldn't enter the ring with professional boxers—you wouldn't even enter the ring with amateurs. Yet when you approach an agent, you are competing with world-class authors. Keep in mind the level of your competition, raise the bar for yourself, aim higher, and don't be discouraged if it takes time.

### **Digging in for a Longer Effort.**

Before we begin to look at specific ways to build your bio and platform, the most important factor must be discussed in advance: you must be prepared to dig in for a longer effort. Change your plan from a three month plan to a 20 year plan. As with getting published, perseverance and patience are also the most important traits in landing publicity and credentials: it is these traits alone that will make the difference in your getting to where you want to be.

This sounds obvious, but it's not. Many authors are impatient, expecting laurels and publicity to come right away. If they are not successful within a few months, they give up. Dig in for a 20 year effort instead. Goals that seem absolutely unattainable in one year—such as landing a major endorsement or appearing on CNN—may seem possible to attain in 20.

If you love the craft of writing and are truly in it for the passion of it, then twenty years should not seem like a long time—indeed, if you have a true love for it, you will want to write and publish for your entire life. Twenty years should certainly give you ample time to do all of the things you need to become expert at your writing, learn the industry like a pro, make the connections, garner the publications, awards, laurels and all the other ammunition you'll need to break down the doors. Indeed, by then, if you're taking the right steps, agents will probably come to you.

But you must first truly change your mindset, and dig in for a multi-year effort in which you devote some time every day. I've seen some authors plug away at publicity day in and day out for years, and then suddenly one day a television or radio show calls, and they get their big break. If they had given up after a few weeks or months, or if they hadn't put in the daily effort, none of this would have been possible. I've seen other authors finally land that big television or radio show, but not land a second show for many more years.

Media connections take time to build. It takes time for producers to get used to hearing from you, and to trust you. It also takes time to gather the media experience to realize what works and what doesn't. Think long term, and realize that this process is not just about fishing for publicity, but also about building your following and your career. A successful book publication is one and the same with the publicity the book can generate, and this is where your years of effort can make all the difference in your book's performing, and in your being able to land future book deals.

Now let's look at specific platform-building techniques. Since so much of platform-building has shifted to the web these last few years, I've devoted the first eight steps entirely to ways to build your platform online—which in turn will be crucial to your building it in the real world. The below eight steps also apply equally to writers of fiction and non-fiction.

### **8 Ways to Build Your Platform (for both Fiction and Non-Fiction).**

#### **1. Build a website.**

By now, this has become a universal principal, even for those not seeking publicity, and thus this should be obvious. What might not be obvious is that you should do this first, before anything else, because when you approach

media, it will make a world of difference if you already have a site to refer them to. On your site, they should be able to see pictures of you, video of you, read an excerpt from your book, and be able to easily contact you, among other things. Your website is your home base, and as you manage to land publicity, you should update it.

## 2. Build a blog.

In addition to your main site, you should also build a blog. Redundancy online is a good thing: one never knows where traffic may come from, and it just may be that a blog leads to something that your main site does not. (Of course, they should prominently link to each other.) One of the many nice things about a blog is that you can easily offer links to an RSS feed which can get it syndicated throughout the web. It is also easy to set up, and is free.

## 3. Get maximum search engine exposure.

Most people build a site and/or a blog and then don't make much effort to bring traffic to it. They assume the traffic will come—but in reality, the traffic must be driven there. The main way people stumble upon sites is through the search engines (such as Google), and usually they click on sites that come up in the top 10 of their Google searches. You have to make a concerted effort to get your site and blog to come up in those top 10 hits. There are many ways to

do this, such as maximizing the meta-tags and keywords on the homepage of your site, adding content on a single page which is relevant to the keyword search, and paying for search engine submission services. You might even want to hire an internet marketing expert if you don't feel comfortable doing all of this yourself.

#### 4. Get a video up.

The web has become a video culture. Some videos on youtube garner hundreds of thousands of views—and in addition to youtube, there are countless video hosting sites out there. Many visitors are more likely to watch a 60 second video than to read through pages on a blog, and thus by creating one (or more) quality videos and getting them out on the web, you will likely increase traffic to your site substantially. And if the video features you speaking, and is effective, it also serve to make PR outlets feel more comfortable about having you on their show. Video also offers you a chance to get really creative: for example, some authors film short videos about a topic related to their book and use that to drive traffic to their site. And it offers a chance to go viral in a way that text does not.

#### 5. Establish a podcast.

There is a large community of listeners out there that prefers to get its content via podcasts, that prefers to listen to audio rather than read a weekly blog. There are also countless sites out there that offer directories of podcasts. By creating a weekly audio recording and offering it for syndication with podcasts, you can bring in a whole new element of listeners, and potential fans. These recorded segments can also serve to make radio shows more comfortable in having you on.

#### 6. Utilize the social networking sites.

Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Goodreads, Librarything...there are so many social networking sites out there now, and they have evolved from being social sites to becoming potentially powerful marketing tools. It all depends on how you use them, of course. Each one offers the potential for you to cross paths with certain people who you may have not met in another way, and to increase awareness about your book. One never knows what a single connection might lead to.

#### 7. Compile an email list and stay in touch using a regular e-zine.

You should offer visitors a place to opt-in to your weekly (or monthly) e-zine. Over time, this email list can grow, and if you have accumulated, for example, 100,000 emails by the time your book publishes, this alone can make

a substantial difference in sales. Having a huge email list will also be one more factor in making the case to convince an agent and publisher to take you on.

#### 8. Offer a free excerpt of your book.

People love getting things for free, and by taking a chapter or two (or three) of your book and giving it away for free, you may very well end up bringing in a lot of traffic that you might not have received otherwise. If you have written multiple books and if you are so inclined, you might even decide you want to give away an entire e-book for free. Even if nothing comes from it from a marketing perspective, you may find a great sense of satisfaction by being charitable and giving others something for free which they might really enjoy and/or which might really help them.

When I wrote and self-published my e-book, *How to Write a Great Query Letter*, in 2006, I initially put it up as a paid e-book, and it was selling extremely well—so well, that the royalties soon outpaced royalties from all my other books. But after about a year, in 2007 I decided to stop selling it and to give it away for free. Since then, tens of thousands of authors have downloaded it, and I have received countless letters from people telling me how much it has helped them, and what a huge difference it has made in their careers. Yes, I have given up a large amount of revenue by giving that book away free, but nothing can replace my sense of satisfaction at knowing how much it is has

helped others—and continues to help others. I still give it away for free, and I still ask for nothing in return. It is not always only about making a profit.

Keep in mind that the internet evolves every day, and the above eight tips for building your platform online are just a starting point. Stay abreast of emerging websites and technologies and take advantage of them as they launch, and continue to experiment and find your own ways to build your platform online. As all these diverse methods show you, there is no one correct way to go about it—the more, the better.

Now let's look at specific ways of building your bio if you are a novelist.

### **9 Steps to Building Your Bio (for Fiction).**

#### 1. Get your short stories out there.

If you are writing (or have written) short stories, get them all out of the drawer and start submitting them to prestigious magazines. Not just to two or five magazines, but to 40 or 50 magazines each. Stay with it until you land some nice magazine publication credits. Having prestigious magazine credits won't make the difference alone, but they do add up, and one never knows: if you should get lucky enough to land one in the *New Yorker*, then agents and publishers will be calling you.

2. Serialize your novel.

If you are writing novels, take a self-encapsulated chapter of your novel and submit it to the magazines who will publish novel excerpts. Even better, see if you can take that excerpt and revise it to make it a stand-alone short story, which will open up the range of magazines who will publish it.

3. Enroll in a writing course (either locally or online) with a prestigious novelist.

By doing so, at the very least, you might just learn something new, or improve your manuscript, and you will be able to put on your resume that you studied with this person. You also might end up making a personal connection with someone who might one day be willing to endorse you and/or recommend you to his agent or publisher. (Again, since I hate advising authors to spend money, only do this if you can easily afford it.)

4. Enroll in an MFA program.

Again, I would not advise this if you cannot easily afford it. Most MFA programs are costly and will put a writer in debt, doing more harm than good. Thus I only recommend this route if you easily have the money to spare, or if you land a scholarship. Being in such a program can be beneficial in many

ways, as it can help improve your writing, can lead to wonderful faculty (and fellow student) connections, can put you in a more serious, full-time mindset about your writing, and will give you more credentials. But again, many authors believe that graduating from an MFA is the key to getting published, and I assure you that for many authors, it is not—so don't enroll if you cannot easily afford it, or don't have the inclination. I've seen many wonderful authors get published without stepping foot in an MFA. And some MFAs do more harm than good, if you should have the bad luck to be paired up with overly critical faculty and/or peers who deter you from the writing process.

##### 5. Visit good writing conferences.

At good writing conferences you can often take workshops with famous authors (per above), and many of them host publishing professionals, too, some of whom offer workshops and critiques. It's a long shot, but you just might end up making a personal connection in one of them. The more intimate and exclusive the conference, the better the likelihood of your making a personal connection. I've been to conferences where there are 500 authors for every agent, and this sort of environment is not very conducive to making a connection.

Again, I advise you not to attend these conferences if money is an issue. I've seen too many authors spend large sums of money to attend conferences

just in the hopes that they make an industry connection. They usually walk away disappointed. These conferences are not the panacea that many authors believe them to be, and again, making a substantial connection is a long shot. Only attend if you truly have the funds and leisure to do so, and if you don't expect too much from it.

#### 6. Apply to selective writers colonies and residencies.

This is a great thing to do, because many of them offer fellowships, and thus you don't have to pay at all. If you get into one of the good ones, you'll likely be in a place filled with established writers who, if you develop relationships, might just endorse your work, or recommend you to their agents. A long shot, but you never know. At the very least, you will be able to add this, too, to your resume.

#### 7. Take a course (locally or online) with a publishing professional.

If you are lucky enough to live in one of the cities that offer access to publishing industry professionals (such as New York), take advantage of it. NYU, for example, offers an evening publishing course. The Learning Annex does, too, and there are many other venues that bring together publishing professionals and the general public. Some of these courses may be geared towards teaching one about the publishing industry—but if you end up

making a connection as an author, then that is just as well. Again, it is a long shot, but you never know what might come out of it. And if it is a course geared for improving your writing, you can add this to your resume, too.

Incidentally, the annual Book Expo conference hosts many speeches by industry professionals, and you never know if you might end up making a personal connection by attending one.

#### 8. Apply for as many awards, grants and fellowships as you can.

Not only might this yield you income, but it can be very prestigious to add to your resume.

#### 9. Think harder of who you know.

Most writers don't stop to really think about who they know at the querying stage—instead, they assume this will be dealt with at publication time. Wrong. The time is *now*. If you have any connections whatsoever, now is the time to approach them. Before you approach a single agent, think of the famous writing teachers you've studied with over the years and consider whether they'd be willing to endorse you. It might be worth sending them a letter. If you haven't studied with anybody famous, then wrack your brain for anybody you know who might know someone. Now is not the time to be bashful.

## **The Importance of Getting Out There**

You'll notice that many of the above steps have one thing in common: getting yourself out there. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for you, as an author, to get yourself out there in the real world, to social events that might help your career. Maybe it's a class, or a workshop, or a course, retreat, colony, conference, or even a party. If you don't live near any such events, consider planning a trip to one. Authors, by the very nature of their profession, are forced to sit alone, writing, day after day. The solitude can too easily become a habit, and the most important publishing encounters for your career may very well happen in social situations. There is only so much you can do in a room by yourself, even with the internet and a phone. There will be times when a call or email simply will not yield results—whereas a chance face-to-face meeting will. There is something magic that can happen in person that can never happen otherwise, and there are people you will encounter by chance at a gathering that you will never cross paths with any other way. Quite often, it is these very people that end up being the key to your getting published.

**Before you Build Your Platform (Non-Fiction).**

As discussed above, with certain types of non-fiction, such as serious history and biography, your platform will take a back seat to your background and credentials. If you are writing in these genres, you'll really have to focus on establishing your credibility, and the best way to do that is to become an expert in your field. This is usually done by pursuing advanced degrees, doing advanced research, winning fellowships, awards, etc. The number of years you spend in any given field will also increase your credibility (which goes back to the issue we discussed earlier of preparing for a longer effort).

The depth of your expertise becomes more of an issue if you are writing about a topic which has already been broadly written about. For example, if you are writing yet another straightforward biography of Abraham Lincoln, publishers are going to want to see a Ph.D. from Harvard and 20 years of unique research. If you are proposing a biography of a little-known subject who has hardly ever been written about, or if you have come up with a truly different angle for a period of history, then publishers may be more lenient with your credentials. Of course, having a platform always helps, but it is secondary.

With all other types of non-fiction, though, platform is all important. Your credentials and experience are important, too, of course, but a funny thing tends to happen in this niche of the industry, which is that, if an author has done enough national media, then this media in and of itself starts to suffice as

credentials. If a pop psychologist appears on CNN once a week, every week, then publishers will forgive the fact that he doesn't have a Ph.D., or even a Masters degree. His platform is so strong, it makes up for it.

While the notion of your ever appearing in national media may seem daunting at first, believe it or not, you can get there. There is indeed much that you can do to build your platform, and many small, concrete steps you can take. In preparation, first consider these three questions:

1) Are you truly prepared to put in the time to make a daily, sustained, consistent effort? When you talk about building your platform, what you are really talking about is becoming a part-time publicist on your own behalf. Being a publicist is a full-time job for the pros, and don't assume that it will be any less time consuming for you. The single biggest mistake authors make when trying to build their platform is that they make a few half-hearted attempts at publicity, or only intensely seek publicity for a limited period of time. But the authors who hang in there, day after day, for hours at a time, are the ones who ultimately build their platform.

2) Are you comfortable with the process of trying to get publicity? Will you be comfortable actually appearing on that radio show when it happens? For some people, the idea of appearing on a show is terrifying. If so, are you prepared to learn how to become comfortable, whether that entails hiring a media coach who can critique you on your presentation, or whether that

entails taking a class to overcome performance anxiety? If you actually land that TV show and give a poor delivery, it's not going to help you sell books, or land additional publicity. I've seen some authors land national TV and radio but give such a poor presentation that their book didn't sell any copies—while I've seen authors land just local media but be so dynamic and engaging that their book sold very well. Don't just ask yourself how you are going to get there—also ask yourself how you are going to perform once you do.

3) Finally, before you do any publicity (and indeed, before you approach the industry with your book), ask yourself some hard questions. Namely, what is it that you have to offer as a person? How is it unique? What do you have to teach people? What is your message? How does it stand out from the competition? How will you be helping others? What will you tell them that they've never heard? Does it come across in your book? At the end of the day, it is your *message*, your *content*, that will sustain your book. You can land all the publicity in the world, but if you don't have much to say, it won't do much good.

Everyone is special, and everyone has something unique inside them to convey. The more clear you are on what your message is, the more likely you'll be able to convey it, and the more likely it will come through in your book—and in the media.

## **8 Ways to Build Your Non-Fiction Platform.**

### **1. Gather endorsements.**

As with fiction, begin gathering endorsements—yet with non-fiction, it may be slightly different. Your endorsements, for example, may also include testimonials. If you have any well-known clients, approach them. If not, perhaps one of your clients is friends with someone who is well-known. Can you ask him to make the introduction? Having endorsements makes a big difference, and often the means to obtaining them is either at your fingertips, or is just one or two steps removed. You have to make a proactive effort, and it may be uncomfortable to ask—but if you don’t, they won’t come to you.

If you absolutely don’t know anyone, consider offering your services or expertise to well-known people for free in return for an endorsement. You may even consider reaching out cold to other experts in the field to try to garner their endorsements.

None of this is easy, but you have to at least try.

### **2. Build a speaking platform.**

You never know if you might find success as a public speaker, and this may be one more way of building your platform. Speaking in front of large

crowds might also lead to a connection, to someone wanting to book you for some other publicity, and in this way, momentum can build. If you can establish a network of large venues that want to have you speak, that can make a big difference in supporting sales of your book when it publishes, and in turn, can make a difference in landing an agent and publisher. Someone on the level of an Anthony Robbins, who may speak in front of tens of thousands of people each year, can get a book deal simply by virtue of the number of people he speaks to. Reaching that level isn't easy, but you can work towards it. You can start speaking locally, to smaller audiences, and try to build it up to larger and larger audiences. Eventually, you might even be able to find a speaker's agent, who can book you to bigger audiences.

### 3. Build a press kit, and send it out.

As you start to gather some momentum, make sure that you keep a careful record of all of your publicity achievements, and that you keep track of them in a frequently updated press kit. You will need to use this press kit to continually query media. Every time you land media, you can add it to your press kit, and before you know it, you will have media experience, and it will

be easier to garner more. It is good to have both an electronic version and a physical version of the kit, both of which can also include video and audio.

#### 4. Approach newspapers.

Approach newspaper columnists to see if they'd like to quote you as an expert in their column. Eventually approach the newspaper itself to try to land your own column. Again, you may want to start locally. It is just one more piece of the puzzle, but if you get lucky and end up with a national, syndicated column, it can make a huge difference, both in selling books and in landing a deal to begin with. Op-eds are worth trying, too. Oftentimes other media, such as radio or television, will read op-eds, and they may invite you on as a result.

#### 5. Approach magazines.

As with newspapers, approach magazines relevant to your subject matter and try to be quoted as an expert in a column and eventually to land individual assignments and/or a column of your own. Again, it is just one more piece of the puzzle, but if you get lucky and end up with an article in a national magazine, you might just catch the eye of an agent or editor. At the very least, it gives you a lot of credibility and momentum with your landing other media.

## 6. Approach radio.

It may seem daunting to send your press kit out to radio stations, but you never know. There are many smaller stations out there, particularly ones inclined to your subject matter, that might be happy to have you on. And of course, if you land one radio show, it will increase your chances of landing others. And if you should be so lucky as to land a national radio show, and especially if you should be on repeatedly, that can make a big difference in both landing an agent and in selling books when the time comes. These days there are many internet radio stations, too, and they might be even more likely to have you on the air. There are even websites that will allow you to build and host your own radio show easily. One never knows what might come of it.

## 7. Approach television.

As with radio, the same applies to television. It tends to be even harder to land than radio, but again, start locally, and you never know. Also consider all of the internet TV stations that may be hungrier for content. As with radio, you can also use a venue like youtube to create your own “TV station.” Some authors have managed to garner hundreds of thousands of views this way.

## 8. Websites.

Every newspaper, magazine, radio and TV show has a website, and it is often easier to land publicity online—indeed, many of these outlets offer content that is exclusively available online. So if you have a hard time breaking into any of these venues in the traditional way, try to see if you can land something on their sites.

There are also a ton of websites that are *only* websites (that have no real-world affiliates), that get tons of traffic. Approach these, too.

#### 9. Consider hiring a publicist.

If money is no object for you, then you might consider hiring a publicist, which can take you to a whole new level. I am always wary to recommend hiring a publicist, though, because I've seen many authors hire publicists only to have them produce little or no publicity results. I've seen other authors get tremendous publicity results and yet still sell few books. I especially don't advise your hiring one if you can't easily afford it. But if you can easily afford it, and if you go into it not counting on receiving anything in return, then it is worth considering.

Keep in mind that, even with all of these tips and techniques, none of this is easy. And there is no assurance that even if you do achieve all of this and build a great platform and land great publicity, that it will necessarily have a

significant impact on an agent's decision. Agents are hard to impress, and when it comes to PR and platform, they will usually only be impressed by sustained, national PR, like someone who is frequently on CNN, NPR, or frequently quoted in the *New York Times*.

That said, every little bit helps.

Whether you are building your fiction bio or your platform for non-fiction, all of this hard work eventually build. At first it may seem as if this were all being done merely for the sake of landing an agent, merely for the sake of breaking through. But it's not. You're not only building a launching pad, you're also building a publishing career. While it may seem like building up your credentials and your network is something you do *after* a book is published, it is really something you must do *beforehand*. Having a strong platform and bio will end up being a huge asset when it comes time to market your book. It will help your agent market you, help your publisher market you, help publicists market you, help sales reps sell you, and help the booksellers hand-sell you to their customers.

How do you know when your platform is big enough to assure you a book deal? Well, pretend you are the publisher, and examine your own platform objectively, from a publisher's perspective. If you were to self-publish your book, for example, are you convinced that, given your current platform,

thousands of copies will be sold? If so, it sounds as if you are on the right track. If not, if you wouldn't feel comfortable publishing it yourself, then why should a major, mainstream publisher take that chance? If so, it might be worth waiting until your platform is bigger.

Remember, think long term.

PART II:

THEM

## Chapter Four:

### How to Research Agents (35 Resources)

The reason 99% of manuscripts get rejected is, simply, because authors approach the wrong agents to begin with. As writers, we know there is no comparison between a good word and the *perfect* word. Similarly, there is no comparison between *any* agent and an *appropriate* agent.

To compile a list of appropriate agents, thorough research is required. Not three hours' worth, but three *months'* worth. Such information used to be difficult to obtain; I remember when I began working as a literary agent in 1995 (before the explosion of the internet), it was nearly impossible to find reliable sources of information listing the names of people in the industry. When one did find information, it tended to be hopelessly out of date. It didn't help that the book publishing industry has always been tight-lipped, wary of revealing any contact information to outsiders. If you were an author trying to get published back then, your chances of finding good information were bleak. It made a hard task even harder.

All that has changed. Today's aspiring authors don't realize how easy they have it compared to aspiring authors of just ten years ago. Today, thanks to the internet, one can find accurate, up to the minute information—and find it

within seconds, and often for free. Indeed, because of this, today's author, if he knows how to research, stands a much greater chance of getting published. He has all the tools for success behind him. All he needs is a wonderful book, and the will and persistence to find it a home.

To become a successfully published author, you have to wear many hats: as we discussed earlier, you will have to put on a publicist's hat at some point if you want to cultivate contacts, strengthen your bio and build your platform. Then, to accurately find the best agent for you, you will have to spend months putting on the hat of a private detective. If you truly want to make sure that your work is read by exactly the right people (which makes all the difference), then you just have to put in the time doing the research.

Below are several good resources to help get you started. I would advise you create a customized database of your own, using Excel or whatever database program you prefer. As you do your research, note not only the name of the agent and his agency, but also all the titles and authors he's represented. This information will be crucial later, when it comes time to approach the agent (more on this in Chapter 5). Don't stop until you've gathered the names and contact information of at least 50 appropriate agents. (That's right, 50. More on this later, too.)

Before we jump into the specific resources, you are going to need to know what to be on the lookout for. Here are a few things to consider:

## **13 Factors to Consider When Evaluating an Agent.**

### 1. Is he legitimate?

Doe he charge a reading fee? If so, don't query him. There are many excellent agents that will read your query for free, and these are the ones you should approach. (We will discuss the topic of fee-charging agents at length in Chapter 7.)

### 2. Fiction or non-fiction?

As discussed earlier, many agents will represent one or the other, but not both. As a starting point, make sure they are representing predominantly fiction (if you are a novelist) or non-fiction (if you are not).

### 3. Literary or commercial?

Many agents tend to lean towards representing only literary or commercial work. As a starting point, make sure they are representing predominantly literary or commercial works, depending on what you have written.

### 4. Historical or Contemporary (fiction)?

Many agents who represent fiction tend to lean towards representing either contemporary or historical fiction. As a starting point, make sure they are representing predominantly contemporary or historical, depending on what you have written.

#### 5. Practical or Narrative (non-fiction)?

Many agents who represent non-fiction tend to represent either practical (i.e. parenting, business) or narrative (i.e. history, biography) non-fiction. Memoir tends to fall into a class by itself. In any case, make sure they have a track record representing your particular genre.

#### 6. Hardcover or paperback?

There is a divide in the publishing industry between editors who publish hardcover or paperback editions; likewise, some agents will tend to represent more paperback original deals, while others will represent more hardcover deals. While it is possible to achieve a huge success with a paperback original, as a starting point, if given the option, it would be preferable for you to land a hardcover deal.

#### 7. How many deals have they made in their career?

There is a big difference between being represented by an agent who has consummated 5 deals in his career and one who has consummated 200. I've been an agent for 13 years and have consummated nearly 250 book deals, and yet even now, after all this time, no two book deals are the same. Every book deal has its own unique issues, and there is no way to know what to expect without having simply done a certain amount of deals—and even then, you will always be surprised. Being a literary agent is one of those professions where experience is all. If you sign with an agent who has done only three deals, you take the risk of ending up with a deal or a contract which is not as good as it could have been.

That said, at the same time, you are far more likely to find an agent to represent you if you target those who have done fewer deals. So this is a fine line. There is nothing necessarily wrong with an agent who has only done a few deals—everyone has to start somewhere. But if you have two offers of representation, and one agent has done far more deals than the other, then, all things being equal, choose the latter.

#### 8. How many deals have they made recently?

Perhaps an agent has done 200 deals in his career but has only made one deal in the past year; alternately, another agent may have only done 24 deals in his career, but did 15 of them in the past year. If you have to choose between

the two, all things being equal, choose the latter. The publishing industry is a fleeting one; agents and editors come and go all the time. Like Hollywood, the industry is not about what you have done last year, but about what you have done *right now*. The agent who is active *now* is more likely to be more up to date with industry information.

#### 9. What kind of publishers have they done deals with?

It's very telling to see not only how many deals an agent has done, but which publishers he has done them with. Has he done 20 deals, and are 18 of them with small presses? Has he done 12 deals, but all of them are with major publishers? Has he only done deals with academic publishers? Have 11 of his 12 deals been with the same publisher? Ideally, you want an agent who has done the vast majority of his deals with a broad variety of major publishers, since major publishers tend to pay the highest advances, print the most copies of your book, get the most review attention, and get the best distribution. Of course, there will always be exceptions—many small-presses prove this wrong—but as a rule of thumb, you do want to start with major publishers first. If a potential agent has only done deals with small publishers, for example, this is a major red flag.

#### 10. What kind of advances has he negotiated?

If an agent has done 40 deals, and none have been for six figure advances, it is a red flag; alternately, if another agent has done 12 deals, and 8 have been for six figure advances, you should lean towards him. (We will talk about how to determine the size of an agent's deals later in the chapter.) Some agents think big, while other agents don't; some agents have stronger negotiating skills than others; some are just better at what they do. I don't want to give you false hopes: landing an agent at all is a major accomplishment, and landing a book deal—for any advance—with a reputable publisher is an even greater accomplishment. There is nothing necessarily wrong with an agent getting you a \$10,000 advance, and in fact the vast majority of deals are for less than six figures, and probably even for less than \$50,000. However, you don't want to limit yourself out the gate, and it's best to begin your search with agents who consistently land bigger deals.

#### 11. Do you recognize any of the other authors he represents?

Just because an agent is representing “literary fiction,” it doesn’t necessarily mean he has great taste in books, or that he represents acclaimed authors. If two agents both equally want to represent you, and you know that one of them represents authors you’ve heard of and respect, and the other has authors you’ve never heard of, then it’s a safer bet to go with the former. It does take time to build a client list, but if an agent has been in the business for

10 years and you still don't recognize a single author he represents, then it is a red flag.

12. Do you think you'd be a good match with his client list?

Based on the authors and books he represents, do you think you'd be a good match with his client list? If one agent represents ten clients and they are all major literary lions, and another represents ten clients and they are all first time novelists, and you yourself would be a first time novelist, chances are the latter would both be more likely to represent you and would give you more time and attention. Similarly, do you feel that the subject matter and style of the books he's represented are similar to yours? Do you instinctively feel that he would "get" your work? These are all important issues to consider.

Along these lines, you might begin by making a list of authors whom you respect and/or who are writing books similar to yours, and begin by approaching their agents. Although, of course, one never knows: if an agent has sold a book similar to yours, he might not want to take on a work too similar, for fear of competing with his own clients. Yet in the scheme of things, it is better to start with an agent who's representing work similar to yours.

13. How receptive is he to new clients?

If an agent has been in business for 5 years, he will be less likely to take on new clients—even less so if he has been an agent for 10 years. For example, when I started my own agency 13 years ago, I was very eager to take on new clients, and very receptive to query letters. Now I am not taking on new clients at all.

As a rule of thumb, beginning writers stand a much better chance of landing an agent if they target an agent who is just starting out, someone who has been an agent for three years or less, someone who has proven himself by securing at least a few deals with major houses but is actively looking for more clients. (This factor alone can make the difference in finding an agent.) Just because an agent is starting out doesn't make him any less competent or capable; in fact, it often makes him work harder on your behalf—which can make the difference in getting you your first deal.

Throughout the course of your research, keep in mind that you will rarely be able to find out all of the above information on any given agent. For example, you might be able to find out about some of the clients he represents, but not how receptive he is to new clients; you might be able to find out how many deals he's done, but not how large the advances were; you might be able to find out about a few of his successful titles, but not about his entire range of deals. Not all publishing deals are reported to the press, and

thus a website may tell you an agent has consummated 50 deals when in fact he has consummated 150.

Thus be careful not to rule out any given agent too soon: if you are serious about a potential agent, truly research deeply, and cross-reference as many sites and sources as you possibly can. Know that even with the best research, you will probably not be able to find out everything. Also know that even if you do find out everything, and even if all of your research points to the absolutely perfect agent for you, that agent might very well surprise you and not be interested at all; conversely, research might indicate that an agent is an unlikely match for you, and he may turn out to be perfect. None of this is a science.

This is why I say that, to maximize your chances of finding the most appropriate agent for you, it requires both thorough research and approaching as many agents as possible.

Now let's look at several specific resources that will help you do the research.

## **24 Free Resources for Researching Agents.**

1. [www.publisherslunch.com](http://www.publisherslunch.com) (the free version)

“Publishers Lunch” is a free e-newsletter (daily and weekly) that reports on the latest publishing deals and news. It offers two versions: a free and a paid version (more on the paid version later). The free version of the newsletter doesn’t report all of the deals, but it still covers many of them. This newsletter is one of the best resources for writers, for several reasons: it is free; it offers up to the minute information; it lands right in your email inbox; and it names the agents involved in the deals, names their agency, and offers a description of the book they sold. If you study this newsletter alone for several weeks, you will be able to start to build a list of appropriate agents for your work.

The only potential downside is that any agent (or editor) can report a deal, and thus it is possible that in any given week there might be agents mentioned who are not as effective as other agents, or who charge reading fees (more on this later). In general, use the criteria we discussed above when compiling your own list of agents—for example, look for agents who land deals with reputable publishers or who represent authors known to you. And of course, all information gathered here (as with any resource) should be cross-referenced against information gathered elsewhere.

## 2—4. [www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com) (contains 3 resources)

Publishersmarketplace.com is the umbrella site for Publisherslunch, and it offers many additional features that will be very useful for you. As with the

newsletter, there is both a free and a paid version (more on the paid version later). In the free version there are three features in particular that will be of use to you: 1) a “SearchMembers” link which allows you to pull up and cross-reference accurate contact information for agents and agencies; 2) links to the “Top 10 most visited agents” on the site. If you follow these links you can learn more about them, their clients, and the deals they’ve done. This feature is updated frequently, so it’s worth checking back regularly, as you can find out about new agents almost every day; and 3) a ton of general news about the publishing industry. Many of these articles will reference the names of agents and agencies, and even if they don’t, it doesn’t hurt to be educated about what’s going on in the industry.

#### 5—8. [www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com) (contains 4 resources)

The website for *Publishers Weekly* contains at least four excellent resources that will be of help to you: 1) the site has a “Deals” link that offers reliable, free information on major deals consummated in the previous week or so, listing names of agents. Keep in mind, though, that PW tends to be more exclusive than other sites when reporting deals. Many listings will likely be substantial (possibly six figures or more), which often means the reported agents are more established, which can mean they are less likely to take on new clients; 2) the site has a search box, which you can use to cross-reference

information on individual agents and agencies; 3) the site offers a wealth of free articles and information about the industry; and 4) it offers a free weekly e-newsletter, PW Daily. The industry information might not be as directly relevant to your needs, but, again, it only helps to absorb industry information—and you might even encounter an article that drops the name of an agent who interests you.

#### 9. Agency Web sites.

Most literary agencies now have their own websites. Typing the name of an agent or agency into a major search engine (like Google) will often yield the exact URL within seconds. Some agency sites are extensive, and you will be able to glean a lot of current information about the agency that you may not find elsewhere. Often you'll find a comprehensive client list, recent deals, current submission requirements and preferences, change of address or contact information. You may also discover that the agency is no longer accepting queries, which can save you time and energy.

#### 10. Search engines.

In addition to looking up specific agency websites, you can also browse the major search engines by typing in relevant search terms, such as “literary agent.” (I just tried “literary agent” on Google and it yielded 1.6 million hits,

while “literary agency” yielded 851,000 hits.) Search engines will bring up countless links to excellent resources, such as directories of literary agencies. It can take you months to sort through all of these pages, and much of the information will be irrelevant, but intensive browsing might just reveal an agency site or listing (or other piece of relevant information) you missed elsewhere. And it is invaluable for cross-checking.

## 11. Google Blog Search

In addition to searching the web pages of Google, you can also use the Google Blog search function. This will allow you to type in the name of an agent or agency and see what (if anything) appears about him or his company on the blogs. This may not necessarily reveal the most reliable information, but one never knows what might turn up.

Additionally, you can use Google blog search for general search terms, such as “literary agent” (just brought up 82,482 hits) or “literary agency” (just brought up 30,502 hits). This can yield interesting information which is not immediately apparent from the basic Google Web search function.

## 12—13. Twitter (2 resources)

The amount of content on Twitter has increased so much in the past few months alone, that no exhaustive web search would be complete without

trying a separate search just on Twitter. You can type in an agent's or agency's name and see what comes up. One never knows. You might learn something new about that agent and/or you may even discover that that agent has his own Twitter account, which you can follow.

Additionally, there are now directories of agents who have a presence on twitter. For example, here are two links which track this:

[http://agentquery.leveragesoftware.com/group\\_discussion.aspx?DiscussionID=d696c822a8e24febb2b621e8974219df](http://agentquery.leveragesoftware.com/group_discussion.aspx?DiscussionID=d696c822a8e24febb2b621e8974219df)

or

<http://twitter.com/agentquery>

I am sure that over time that there will arise even more of these.

#### 14—15. Acknowledgments pages (2 resources)

Published authors often acknowledge their agents. Spend some time in large bookstores (and libraries) browsing the acknowledgments pages of books that are relevant to yours. Write down the names of any mentioned agents.

Additionally, the recent explosion of Google's book search ([www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)) has added a whole new dimension to help with an agent search which did not exist until very recently. Visit the site, and in the search box type in the name of the agent in quotes and then the word

“acknowledgments.” Most of these hits will lead you to the Acknowledgments pages of books in which these agents are mentioned. It is a great tool for cross-referencing, and may even teach you about books your potential agent represented.

Additionally, you can also use this search box to type in the name of a particular book which you feel is relevant to yours and then the word “acknowledgments,” and you may just find out who the agent was.

The information in acknowledgments pages is often minimal, but it is yet one more source to be used for cross-referencing.

#### 16. Writersmarket.com

Writersmarket.com offers a paid service (which we'll discuss below), but they also offer a free service, which is their newsletter. Sign up. It doesn't cost anything, and one never knows what small piece of information might prove valuable.

#### 17—19. <http://www.Writersdigest.com> (3 resources)

*Writers Digest Magazine* provides helpful information for writers, and their website is equally helpful. Three aspects in particular may prove useful to you: 1) The main site is filled with many free articles and interviews which may yield industry information; 2) Their free newsletter contains additional

information; and 3) Writers Digest has long had an annual tally of the annual 101 best websites for writers: <http://www.writersdigest.com/101BestSites>. Visit it, and check back annually. Some of the new sites they mention may prove very useful for you.

20. <http://www.guidetoliteraryagents.com/blog>

The *Writers Digest Guide to Literary Agents* has been a staple for aspiring authors for years, and they now offer a free companion blog. One never knows when it might yield valuable information about an agent or agency.

21. <http://www.Agentquery.com>

This site offers a lot of free information about the industry, and offers a free, searchable database of agent and agency information. It is one more source for cross-referencing agent information.

22. <http://www.AbsoluteWrite.com>

This site offers much free information about the industry, along with many good links and resources for the writer. Given its wealth of information, it might end up yielding valuable agent information for you, too.

23—24. [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) and [www.BN.com](http://www.BN.com) top genre bestsellers.

If you go to Amazon and Barnes & Noble's websites, there is an option to browse within your genre. It will bring up the top 100 bestsellers. Look through these and see which are published recently. You can then check the acknowledgments page for each and find out who the agents were. Going this route, you may just discover the name of an agent you hadn't thought of previously.

### **11 Fee-Based Resources for Researching Agents.**

#### 1--5. [www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com) (5 resources)

For a membership price of \$20 a month, you will get access to five invaluable resources on this site. Given how inexpensive it is, and how much you stand to gain in return, this is probably the single best place for you to spend. In fact, if you use all of the above free resources, your spending \$20 a month for this site may just be all you need to spend. The five resources are:

1) Publishers Lunch Deluxe. This daily newsletter (as mentioned earlier) has a more extensive paid version, which you will receive when you join the site. It lists *all* of the reported deals made every week in the publishing industry. By studying this newsletter alone every week, for months, you will find most of the information you need to compile a list of appropriate agents for your work.

2) Top Dealmakers. Once you join you will have access to a “Top Dealmakers” tab, which is one of the single best resources out there. It offers one drop-down tab, from which you can choose either individual agents or agencies, and another drop-down tab from which you can choose your genre (for example, if you’ve written a first novel, you could choose “Fiction/Debut”). It will then bring up the names of the agents who have made the most deals in your particular genre, and who made them recently. It offers links to the deals they did, so you can learn more about the authors and their books. It basically does all of your work for you, and as such, of all the resources, this is the #1 resource I would most recommend. The only downside is that its database doesn’t necessarily contain every deal done by every agent (as mentioned earlier, not all deals are reported), and it can’t let you know how receptive these agents are to new clients. That said, it is the best place to start.

3) “Who Represents” tab. This is another valuable resource to cross-reference specific agents and authors.

4) “Automat.” Not only does their Automat page feature links to endless current stories, but perhaps more importantly for your purposes, if you scroll to the bottom of the page, you’ll find an “Agencies, Agents, Author Advice” link. That link will take you to a collection of agent blogs, all of which you will find very helpful.

5) The rest of the site. Once you join, instead of being only able to access the top 10 most visited agents on the site, you can access information on *any* agent in the site. You can also enter the name of a particular book or author you feel is similar to your work to find the name of the agent. The database might not be as effective for older deals (three years or older), but for recent deals it is excellent. You can also search news archives. And the site is ever-expanding and constantly offering new features, so one never knows what features may be available a few months from now.

#### 6. [www.writersmarket.com](http://www.writersmarket.com)

Www.writersmarket.com (the online counterpart to the successful *Writers Market* book) offers a service, for \$6 per month, that gives you online access to its database of agents. The information is fairly comprehensive, and is up to date. Of the fee-based online services, this is certainly one of the least expensive, and can be very helpful for cross-referencing information.

#### 7. Publishers Weekly ([www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com))

For \$180 a year, you can subscribe to the Virtual Edition of *Publishers Weekly*. This will give you more deal information, and more publishing news in general. It is a bit expensive compared to the others, so it wouldn't be the first paid venue I'd recommend, but it is one more option.

## 8. Agent Research & Evaluation ([www.agentresearch.com](http://www.agentresearch.com))

AR&E is a fee-based service that gives you information on the agents in its database. They offer a variety of services, which tend to give in depth information about each agent.

The downside is that their fees can get expensive. Also, their criteria for including an agent's deals in their database tends to be so rigorous that their "report" on an agent might not necessarily include every deal that agent has actually done. As such, it's not the first paid venue I'd recommend—but again, it's one more option.

## 9. Books

There exist several books (updated yearly) devoted to listing agents and their needs. The advantage of these books is that they are relatively inexpensive and yield a tremendous amount of information. The disadvantage is that they can get dated quickly (often there is at least a six month delay between the time the information was collected and the time the book appears in print). So any information gathered in these books must be verified with other sources.

A few of the good books out there are Writers Digests' *Guide to Literary Agents*, Writers Digests' *Writers Market*, Jeff Herman's *Writer's Guide to Book*

*Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents*, and *Literary Marketplace* (known as the LMP). The latter is expensive (around \$300), so is probably best used as a reference in your local library. It tends to list little information on agents' particular needs, but it is selective as to which agents it includes (an agent must receive three referrals by industry professionals in order to get listed), so the information is usually reliable. Jeff Herman's guide tends to give a lot of in depth information on agents' particular needs, although it doesn't list every agent or agency.

And if you can get all of these books for free in your local library—and get them in a timely manner—you have nothing to lose by looking.

## 10. Magazines

Magazines are likely to be more current than books, given that the information is usually only a month or two old by the time it hits the newsstands. Also, you are more likely to stumble across an in depth article or interview with an agent that yields a lot more information than you can find elsewhere. *Poets & Writers* has always been an excellent resource, and continues to be. The same holds true for *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest*. Even some literary magazines occasionally run interviews with agents. And of course all of these magazines have informative websites, where you can garner much information for free.

## 11. Conferences/Seminars/Workshops

There are a plethora of conferences out there, and I wouldn't necessarily recommend all of them. But there are a handful that attract good agents. The key in choosing a conference (for this purpose) is finding out in advance which agents are attending, how many of them will be attending, and the ratio of agents to writers. If there are two agents for 500 writers, for example, it would probably be less worthwhile than if there are 10 agents for 200 writers. Sometimes (though not always) it is possible to establish a personal connection with an agent at a conference through a consultation, workshop, talk, or chance meeting. At the very least, you can walk away knowing more about the needs of a few. Downside: these conferences can be expensive, thus I would only recommend attending if you have the money to spare.

You now have 35 excellent resources at your fingertips—24 free and 11 paid—which will make all the difference in your researching agents—which, in turn, will make all the difference in your finding and choosing the appropriate agents.

But having good information at your fingertips is useless if you don't know how to utilize it properly. If you know who to contact, but don't contact them in the proper way, it does you little good.

So now let's turn to the next crucial step: your approach.

## Chapter Five: Your Approach

Once you've completed your research and have compiled your list of at least 50 appropriate agents, you are ready for the next phase of action: the approach. The approach is an art form in and of itself, and just as you took time and care to research properly, you must also take care to approach agents in the proper way.

### **The 4 Musts of Submitting.**

1. Increase your target list to at least 50 agents.

I've said this before, and I must say it again: increase the number of agents on your submission list. Whenever I give authors advice about how to land an agent, what surprises them the most is the sheer number of agents I recommend they approach (at least 50). Most authors tend to approach 5 or 10 agents at most. If 50 seems like an excessive number to you, keep in mind that this number alone may very well make the difference in your landing an agent and getting published.

*Landing an agent—like landing a publisher—is ultimately a numbers game.*

The reason most writers fail to land an agent is simply because they don't realize how many appropriate agents are out there, and they allow themselves to become easily discouraged by a few rejections. They take these few agents' reactions (usually inappropriate agents anyway) as gospel, and don't realize that opinions are just that—opinions. The publishing world is incredibly subjective, and agents are wrong all the time. Just ask the agents who rejected *Harry Potter*.

If a few agents (or a few dozen agents) don't like your manuscript, don't allow yourself to be discouraged. Don't take it personally, or put any weight in their responses. Instead, query more. You will eventually find the right one. The person who mails out 200 resumes has a huge advantage over the person who mails out 5. The same holds true with landing an agent.

And certainly don't feel that you have to limit yourself to 50 agents—go for 100 if you like. But make sure that you do indeed approach at least 50.

## 2. Prioritize your agent list.

Below, I am going to discuss in depth why you should query agents simultaneously. In order to do that properly, though, it is best if you first sit down and rank your agents, for example in order of 1 to 50. Or at the very least, break them down into five groups of 10 each, for example, your A list, your B list, your C list, etc. It is going to be important that you approach your

dream agents first, because if an agent offers to represent you, and he is not your dream agent, then you are not going to be able to tell him to wait while you hear back from an agent you like more.

You may not be able to know upfront which agents would be best for you, but try your best, based on other books he's represented, or how many deals he's made recently, or the publishers he's sold to, or the size of the advances—or just your gut. Usually we end up being surprised anyway: the agents we think will be perfect for us end up not responding, while the ones added as a long shot end up being perfect.

### 3. Condense your waiting time.

Writing is your career and potentially your livelihood, and there is no reason why you should have to sit around for months or years and put your career on hold simply because agents are slow to respond. Some agents demand that they be shown your manuscript exclusively, and force you to wait. I take the writer's side on this, though. It is *your* career, and you should not have to wait. You have at least 50 agents to contact, and that takes time.

Thus I recommend your querying 5 or 10 agents at once, for instance, in five rounds of ten. If you've read my free e-book, [\*How to Write a Great Query Letter\*](#), you know that you should be approaching agents with a one-page query letter. Since that letter is just one page, you should wait no longer than 2 to 4

weeks to hear back from that round; if you haven't landed an agent by that time, send off the next round.

This will not only give you the quicker response that you deserve, but it also will take off the pressure, as it won't put so much at stake on any one agent. When a writer thinks he's found his dream agent, and sends off a query and sits there waiting for months to only get a rejection, he can be devastated. He's built this one agent up in his mind, and pinned all his hopes (and waiting time) on him. But when he's queried 50 agents—all equally desirable—it should barely phase him if he receives any one rejection, and this way his career won't be put on hold: if he's not going to land an agent, he'll know within 6 months, not 6 years.

This is important, because many writers wait for months or even years to hear back, and this unnecessarily delays the process. I can't tell you how many writers I've met who tell me they've been querying agents for *years* regarding a particular manuscript and are waiting to "see how it goes" before they think about their next book. In actuality, the entire process of querying all 50 agents should take no longer than six months.

If one or more of these agents requests sample pages, do send them, but also keep querying other agents. If an agent requests exclusivity (that he be given an exclusive time period to consider your manuscript) then you'll have to make a tough decision: to oblige this, it will put your querying process on

hold for that given time period, and you need to decide if it's worth it. You'll have to consider the seriousness of the agent's interest, the quality of the agent or agency, and the amount of exclusive reading time requested (which is why I advised you to prioritize your list in advance, which should help minimize tough situations like this). In general, if requested, I would advise you to indeed give the exclusivity, but to limit it to a certain period of time (for instance, 6 or 8 weeks for a 250 page manuscript), and to let the agent know you are giving him 6 or 8 weeks exclusively.

If you don't hear back in the given time period, keep querying.

Of course, this can get messy: if during that exclusive time period another agent contacts you and requests to see the manuscript, you are in a tough spot. In that case, the best thing to do is to simply wait until the exclusive period is over, and if you haven't heard back, send it off to the other agent. However, what if one agent is less desirable, while the second is your dream agent? Do you risk potentially alienating the dream agent by making him wait eight weeks? And would you even want to sign with a less desirable agent if the dream agent is potentially interested?

Publishing is not a science, and awkward situations can easily arise. Every situation will be unique. In general, the best thing to do is to be up front with everyone, to honor your word when you give it, and to be very careful when deciding who you commit to. No matter how awkward it might potentially

become, it is still better than the alternative, which is waiting for several months or years while agents consider your query letters and manuscripts one at a time.

#### 4. Include an SASE.

There have been many times when I've received a query letter with no SASE (Self Addressed Stamped Envelope) included, and thus had no way of responding to the author. When this happened, I paid for the stamp and envelope myself, so that the author could have a reply. But most agents won't. They receive thousands of queries a year, and they specifically request an SASE be included, and it is industry etiquette that it be done. Thus if a writer breaks the rules, they don't feel obliged to reply. (It also becomes very costly for agents to reply to thousands of letters a year without an SASE.) So if you forget one, you might not get a response. In some agencies, letters without them are simply thrown out.

I have been in some situations over the years where there was no SASE and where the writer also forgot to include his contact information in the letter. I liked his query, but had literally no way of contacting him. And he never followed up. So what might have been a book deal never happened. Don't let something so minor get in your way. Include your SASE, and don't forget your contact info.

### **3 Things Not to do When Submitting**

#### **1. Don't include sample pages with your query.**

Some writers decide that sending a query letter is not good enough; they can't stand the fact that they will be judged solely based upon a letter, and they figure that if an agent just has a chance to see their actual writing, it will change everything. So they include sample pages with their query. Sometimes it's 5 pages, other times it's 40, or 300 pages. I used to receive unsolicited packages via mail all the time, even though I had requested that queries be limited to one page. The temptation to include more pages is even greater via e-mail, since all they need to do is copy and paste their writing into the body of an e-mail, or simply attach a file (more on e-mail queries below).

Do not do this. If you've read my free e-book, [How to Write a Great Query Letter](#), you know that we agonized to get your query letter down to one page. We have not done all of this hard work just so that you can turn around and tack on 5 or 50 pages to the package. If an agent specifically requests that writers query with sample pages, or something longer than a one page letter, then by all means do so. Otherwise, when in doubt, keep it to one page. When a bulky package arrives, it is immediately suspect: chances are that an author is already going against the agent's wishes. Furthermore, an agent is bombarded

with reading material all day long. If a one page letter sits on his desk, there is a greater likelihood he will actually read it. If a 300 page manuscript sits before him, it will more likely be put off. And the longer it's put off, the longer it's sitting there, the more it makes the agent think less of it.

## 2. Don't call or drop it off.

Some writers will call an agent instead of mailing a query letter, or will call first and then send a query. Sometimes they'll call the day after their query letter arrives to ask if I received it. I've even received phone calls from writers' assistants or secretaries, leaving me a message that I should call this writer, since he's too busy to call me himself.

That's just about the worst thing you could do. When considering a new writer, an agent's biggest concern is whether he will be overly aggressive with his time, by calling, emailing, faxing. All an agent has is his time, and if one writer indicates that he will consume it more than others, it is a major red flag. So is the fact this writer is already violating an agent's wishes by calling instead of writing.

It is also a futile task: what are you going to say to the agent once you have him on the phone? That you are mailing him a query letter? What does that accomplish? He won't be looking for it any more as a result of the call. Sometimes writers call me and start pitching their query immediately over the

phone, literally reading the synopsis aloud. They go on about their characters and plots before I even have a chance to speak. I've even had calls where the writer, once finished pitching, asked me to commit to representing him right then and there.

Needless to say, this doesn't work. You are not a telephone salesman. You are a writer. Stick to the written word.

The only thing worse than calling is showing up at an agent's door and dropping off your query letter by hand. This has happened to me many times over the years. Sometimes when I open the door the writer demands to enter my office, sit down, and have a meeting with me right then and there about his query letter. Some writers will drive all the way from other states to do so. An agent will consider this too aggressive. Let the postman do your work for you.

In general, when in doubt regarding your interaction with an agent, always err on the least aggressive path: *not* calling or *not* showing up at an agent's door will never hurt you—but calling, faxing, emailing or “dropping by” unannounced might just tip the scales in the wrong direction.

### 3. Don't include gifts or gimmicks.

I've received many queries over the years that had strange objects included. Sometimes writers will mail in food, candy, a free pen, or some object that fits

in with the theme of the book—like a rose for a book about gardening, or a model spaceship for a science fiction novel. I've received many queries tied with ribbon. I've even received cash in the mail—a few times, a dollar bill, and once a five dollar bill. Needless to say, I sent them back. These won't help you stand out—they will just make you be perceived as gimmicky, and desperate. Let the writing speak for itself.

### **To Fed-Ex or Not to Fed-Ex?**

In the past I have advised authors to consider Fed-Exing their one page query letters, the rationale being that by virtue of a letter's arriving by Fed-Ex (or UPS or any guaranteed delivery service), it will force the agent to pay more attention. There have been times in my career when I'd received 50 to 100 queries in a single day, and a query letter arriving by Fed-Ex certainly stood out. And there have been times when I opened the Fed-Ex right away (expecting it to be something else), and found myself reading the query letter because it was already opened. And there have been times when, as a result, I paid more attention and contacted the author right away. So, speaking from personal experience, there have indeed been times when it made a positive difference.

However, I can understand how this practice might not always be successful with other agents, and might even annoy them. I, for one, admired

the author's ingenuity, but other agents might not, and it could indeed backfire.

My advice that authors consider Fed-Exing has caused a lot of controversy over the years. It was never intended to, and this is partly because it has been taken out of its original context. I always qualified it by saying that 1) it might not work; 2) it might even annoy agents and backfire; and 3) I hate advising authors to spend money unnecessarily, and would only advise this if you easily have the money to spare. Still, my statement continues to be taken out of context, and the controversy continues. This is silly, since many agents and "publishing experts" have no qualms about advising authors to spend thousands of dollars on exotic writing conferences, yet will get up in arms if I advise authors to spend \$15 on a one-time Fed-ex.

To put an end to this controversy once and for all, let me now say—once again—that Fed-exing a query letter is by no means a necessity. Your query letter should end up getting read regardless, Fed-exing may end up not helping at all, and it may even backfire. Particularly if finances are a concern, don't do it. While my advice was originally given with the good intention of helping you get paid attention to, I certainly don't want it to be taken out of context and result in a financial hardship for anyone.

However, if an agent reads your query and requests additional pages, then do follow up immediately (we'll discuss this in depth below). Fed-ex would be great, but if that's a hardship, then, again, priority mail would be fine.

### **To E-Mail or Not to E-Mail?**

What about e-mail? Is it acceptable to query via e-mail? If so, do the rules change? How?

Some agents and agencies welcome queries via e-mail, while others specifically ask that you not e-mail. Some agencies will ask you not to e-mail, but specific agents within the agency will want a query via e-mail. It all depends on the agent and agency. If an agent welcomes queries via e-mail, then respect his wishes. If he doesn't, respect his wishes. If he doesn't specify, then to be safe, query via regular mail.

From my perspective, the real danger here isn't necessarily the medium but rather that because you are sending an email (as you do 50 times a day), you might treat your all-important query letter more casually. And because an agent is receiving just another email (as he does 100 times a day), he, too, might treat it with less importance.

Thus, in general, even if an agent allows queries via e-mail, I would recommend your querying via regular mail. (Unless he specifically requests queries to come only via e-mail.) There is something about e-mail, and the

electronic medium in general, which can make it too easy for a query to be considered with less import. Agents are also flooded with email all day long, so your query might not stand out as much. The experience of reading a query on the screen also somehow enables the process to go a bit more quickly, and thus might lead to queries being glanced over more quickly. There is something about reading a real piece of paper which gives a query more weight.

Additionally, the standard font used in the body of an email is Arial 10 point, which is rather un-elegant and smaller than the standard 12 point font on printed paper. It makes it harder for the agent to read. This sounds trivial, but it's not: reading is an agent's profession, and most agents' eyes are incredibly strained. A document which is in any way harder to read will be put off until it *has* to be read.

Additionally, when you query via e-mail, you can't have control over how the formatting will appear in the agent's inbox. It might shrink or change the font, or drop the other formatting you instituted. The only way to ensure that your formatting stays as is is to send your query as a file attachment, for example, as a Microsoft Word file. But that opens a whole new can of worms: some agents won't want to open attachments at all.

If you end up querying via e-mail instead of regular mail, some of the issues we discussed earlier will obviously no longer apply—for instance, the

SASE and the Fed-Ex. But keep in mind that all of the other issues will: sending to multiple agents at once, querying in rounds, the waiting time. Querying via e-mail will certainly save you a lot of time, effort and money. But, again, only do so if an agent specifically requests this. And if you do so, keep in mind the following:

## **6 Crucial Issues When Querying Via E-Mail.**

### 1. E-Mail address.

First make sure that you query to the proper e-mail address. If possible, find the direct email of the specific agent you wish to query (this information can usually be found at [www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com)). Email that agent directly (for example, [johnsmith@agency.com](mailto:johnsmith@agency.com)), as opposed to emailing the general agency mailbox (for example, [queries@agency.com](mailto:queries@agency.com)). You don't want your query going to the general agency mailbox, because it might not get read with the same care. All of your research was custom-tailored to particular agents within agencies, and you want to make sure you reach them directly. Especially because you will be beginning your query letter with the sentence: "I am writing to you because you represented X book by X author" (which we discussed at length in my free e-book, [\*How to Write a Great Query Letter\*](#)).

## 2. Formality.

The query you send via e-mail should be the same query you would have sent via regular mail. It should carry the same weight, preparation and formality. As mentioned above, just because you are querying via e-mail doesn't give you license to write a more personal, relaxed note to an agent. Because the email medium is now used as a daily part of life, most writers feel license to transform their query from a formal query letter to a hybrid query letter/e-mail/personal note. E-mail is a casual, informal medium and can allow you to lower your guard. A query letter is the farthest thing from casual, and must be kept that way.

## 3. Attachments.

Essentially the only way to assure proper formatting of a query letter is to send it as an attachment, for example as a Microsoft Word file. The problem with this, though, as we said above, is that some agents won't want to open attachments. Even if an agent is willing to open an attachment, emails that have attachments can get delayed being opened by virtue of the fact that it takes slightly more work to launch an attachment (than merely scrolling through the body of an already-opened email). With attachments you also take the risk of their getting caught up in a spam blocker, and the risk of program or computer incompatibility, for example, if your file is in a newer version of

Word and the agent is using an older version, or if you're using Works and he's using Word. Problems can also arise between Macs and PCs.

The last thing you want is for the agent to actually go to the effort to open a file attachment only to be unable to open it because of technical difficulty. Then he will *really* put it off. Worse, you might force him into a premature correspondence with you over resolving the problems with different files and formats.

Thus, if querying via email, keep it in the body of an email.

#### 4. Body of the E-Mail.

If attaching a file, it raises another issue: what about the body of the email? When you attach, should you also write a letter in the body of the email? If so, the attached letter might seem redundant. Not to mention that you are forcing the agent to read twice as much. The alternative, though, is also awkward, which is to merely send a blank email with an attachment.

If you must attach, the best solution is to include one sentence in the body of the email, something along the lines of, "Attached please find my query letter." Don't make the mistake of writing a long email in addition to an attachment.

#### 5. Length.

Which brings us to the issue of email length. Another reason it is preferable to query with real paper is that it forces you to limit your query to one page. Real paper has margins, ample spacing around the text, and of course a page break. With emails, though, there are no page breaks. This makes it all too easy for your query to ramble on. I find that email queries are, on average, longer than paper queries. Writers who would never break the one page rule with paper for some reason feel free to do so electronically. Not having proper margins or page breaks especially makes this deceptive. Don't allow yourself to fall into this trap. Too long is still too long.

So if you must query via e-mail, make sure you strictly limit the body of the email to the equivalent of one paper page. If you're unsure, simply cut and paste the body into a word document and see if it exceeds one page. You may think that scrolling down a bit more is not a big deal for an agent—but trust me, they will know the difference.

## 6. Website.

Some writers query with an e-mail which merely tells the agent to visit a website to learn more about him and his work. This is a mistake. Most agents won't want to launch websites of unsolicited writers, especially at the querying stage. It takes much longer than merely reading the body of an email, since it takes added time to launch, and added time to navigate the site. Visiting a site

can also potentially cause an agent browser problems. Such a query will get put off, and perhaps not opened at all. Down the road, if the agent is interested in your work, there is nothing wrong with giving him a link to your site.

You're now 90% there. At this point, if you've followed all of my advice carefully, you've prepared your manuscript, done your research thoroughly, and you've taken care to submit in the proper way. You now have a tremendous advantage over most authors out there, and are closer than you've ever been towards landing an agent.

There remains but one important step: follow up.

## Chapter 6:

# The Art of Follow Up

The art of follow up is incredibly important, yet often overlooked. It is a shame, since writers will put so much effort into every other stage, yet assume that once their foot is in the door, they can afford to be careless.

They couldn't be more wrong. Now is the time to be more careful than ever. Indeed, many writers have failed to land an agent only because they didn't handle this final stage well.

### **4 Keys to Successful Follow Up.**

#### **1. Don't wait to send your manuscript.**

There have been times when I've requested to see, say, 30 pages based on a query, and yet these pages didn't arrive until weeks or months later. Hundreds of queries and manuscripts will have passed through my hands during those months, and I'll have little or no recollection of who sent these 30 pages. When I do recall, chances are I'll be annoyed: the fact that he waited weeks or months to send them could only mean that he had been waiting to

hear back from other agents first. It makes me feel like a second choice. I would already be biased.

So if an agent requests pages, be prepared to send them right away.

## 2. Send your requested manuscript via Fed-Ex or Priority Mail.

Which brings us back to the Fed-Ex issue. The best way to get requested pages to the agent right away is to, obviously, use a fast delivery service. If you wait, not only do you risk agents suspecting you of waiting to hear back from other agents, but you also risk their forgetting about your query altogether. Agents get overwhelmed by queries and manuscripts every single day. Within days they can be on to other projects, and forget yours. The sooner your requested manuscript arrives on their desk, the better your chances of its still being fresh in their mind.

Additionally, Fed-Ex (or Priority Mail) makes for a nicer presentation, for a package to be taken more seriously, than regular mail. Just because you've reached the manuscript stage doesn't mean you can stop caring about presentation—on the contrary, now you should care even more so. You must also realize that your manuscript, even if requested, still stands a chance of landing in the slush pile by accident: often times interns or assistants open the regular mail, and they might not realize your manuscript was requested. It

could accidentally end up in the wrong pile and sit there for months. If it comes via Fed-Ex (or Priority Mail), there is less chance of this happening.

Again I would temper all of this by saying that you should only use Fed-Ex if you can easily afford it, and Priority Mail will suffice, too. The greater point here isn't the delivery service, but rather to follow up with haste when an agent requests pages.

### 3. Include a copy of your original query letter.

To prevent confusion, always make a photocopy of an agent's request to see your manuscript and put it on the top of your package. Also make a copy of your original query letter, and include them both when sending in your manuscript. This way, an intern or assistant can make no mistake.

Additionally, this will help remind the agent of who you are and what he requested. If he receives your manuscript with no reminder of your original query, he might forget, and put off reading it. It validates your submission.

There have been many times when I've received a manuscript from a writer who said in his letter "as you requested," when in fact I had never requested it. It's an old trick to grab an agent's attention—but agents are aware of this, and it can backfire. When you include a copy of the agent's letter, though, he will remember your original submission and know for sure that he had, indeed, requested it.

4. Send exactly what was requested.

If an agent requests 10 pages, send 10 pages; if he requests 23, send 23.

Many times I'll ask for 50 pages and receive 250 pages, with a note saying

"You just had to see what happened on page 248!" This is the first red flag.

Respect an agent's wishes. Agents don't need many pages to make a decision, or to decide if the style of writing is what they're looking for; sending 50 pages instead of 30 won't make them any more inclined to represent you—especially if they only asked for 30.

You need to have faith in your writing ability, faith that page 1 or page 6 can represent you as well as page 59 or page 112. If your book were published and a potential book buyer were browsing it in a store and he was not intrigued by, say, page 14, you will not have the luxury of being able to tap him on the shoulder and ask him to hang in there until page 30. So if page 11 can't represent you as well as page 54, then you need to reevaluate your writing. Don't compensate by sending additional pages.

From an agent's perspective, it's not such a huge deal to receive 70 pages instead of 30—the real problem is what this indicates: an author not respecting one's wishes. If an agent takes on an author, he will be entering into a multi-year relationship. Thus he looks for any warning signs that this person

may be difficult to work with. Something as small as this can make the difference.

### **To Revise or Not to Revise?**

If an agent asks to see a revised version of the work, and his comments are specific for what he'd like to see revised, and you agree with those comments, then go for it. However, don't assume a nice or long rejection letter detailing problems with the work is an invitation to revise and resubmit—only assume so if the agent *specifically* requests to see another version. In most cases, if an agent rejects a work and does not specifically ask to see a revision, the agent will be biased against it if it comes back revised. You don't want to fall into the trap of following false leads and revising a manuscript endlessly.

Additionally, if your gut tells you that the agent's comments are wrong, and that he doesn't get your work or share your vision, then don't revise. At the end of the day, you are the one that needs to live with your work.

### **Be ready.**

Keep in mind that all agents have different wishes, needs and requirements. Some will want to see 50 pages, others 20; some will want an extended synopsis, others will want to see the entire manuscript, others will

only want a chapter outline. You don't want to be in a situation where an agent requests to see some specific material from you—like a chapter outline—and you don't have it prepared. Thus make sure that you have at least the following three tools ready at your disposal:

#### **4 Tools to Have at Your Disposal.**

##### **1. One page synopsis.**

This is fairly universal, and most agents will ask for this. To be safe, you might want to have two versions ready, one single-spaced, the other double-spaced.

##### **2. An extended synopsis.**

This could be anywhere from 2 to 5 pages. This is where you will finally have the room to say everything you ever wanted to about your plot, characters, subplot, setting, and whatever else you want to convey.

##### **3. A chapter outline.**

Many agents will ask for a chapter outline so that they can get a feeling for how the book will progress, chapter by chapter. This usually consists of a one or two paragraph description for each chapter. By its nature it is dry, but do

your best to keep it lively. This is an especially critical tool when querying with non-fiction.

4. A professional book proposal (non-fiction) or the completed manuscript (fiction).

As discussed at length in Chapter Two.

The time to get all this into final shape is before the querying process—you don't want to hold up an agent once you start querying.

### **Why Rejection Doesn't Matter**

As an agent, I am rejected all day long. I've received on average 10 rejections a day, every day, for over 10 years. A day doesn't go by without rejections pouring in. This is because I perpetually have many books on submission, and editors reject them constantly. Despite this, I've managed to consummate over 200 book deals.

Nearly every book I've ever sold has first been rejected by at least 20 or 30 publishers, sometimes as many as 50. Many of these books have gone on to become bestsellers. If I'd given up after 29 rejections, or even 49, these books would never have been published. Rejections are not to be taken personally—

simply as a matter of statistics. Much like sending your resume out for employment. I don't take it personally when I receive rejections; I understand that no matter how appropriate an editor may seem, editors have different needs at different times.

The same should hold true for your landing an agent.

## Chapter 7:

### How to Protect Yourself

Unfortunately, as you begin to approach the publishing industry, you'll find there are agents out there who take advantage of unsuspecting writers. It is a terrible thing, and hard to police. Since literary agents don't need any special license or degree, and since most people don't really understand everything their profession entails, unfortunately it can be too easy for "agents" to hang a shingle and start to take advantage. While there are a few organizations that agents can join (and thus be monitored), such as the AAR, there are still many legitimate agents who are not members (I am not a member). Thus there is no real watchdog organization that covers every agent and agency (or even the vast majority of agents). Add to this the fact that any given agent, simply by virtue of calling himself an "agent," will receive thousands of query letters from hopeful authors, and you are left with a potentially volatile situation, where it is far too easy for unethical "agents" to take advantage of hopeful authors. The only thing worse than not landing an agent is landing an agent who is a scam artist, or who keeps you bound to an agreement you can't get out of.

The good news is that the internet has helped tremendously in dispensing information on illegitimate agents and their practices. Fifteen years ago it was extremely hard for the unknowing author to easily determine who the bad agents were, aside from a general breakdown of “fee charging” and “non-fee charging” agents. Today, though, there are many good sites that explain to unsuspecting authors what the scams are, and precisely who the illegitimate agents are and why; this information is also updated regularly. It’s unfortunate that there is even a need for such sites, but there is.

### **3 Resources to Protect you From Agent Scams.**

1. The Association of Authors Representatives ([www.aar-online.org](http://www.aar-online.org)) has always devoted itself to policing agents the best it can, and on its site it offers some good questions you might ask an agent in advance. (Be careful, though, to take this with moderation and not to go overboard and end up interrogating a legitimate agent who wants to sign you.)

2. [www.anotherrealm.com/preditors](http://www.anotherrealm.com/preditors). This site has always been one of the staples in informing authors of illegitimate agent and agency practices.

3. Writer Beware (<http://sfwa.org/beware>). This site, too, has always been a staple in informing authors of illegitimate agent and agency practices.

Between the above three sites, you should be able to at least know who many of the specific scam artists are out there, and why. There are other sites out there, too, and new ones pop up all the time. These sites may not necessarily cover everyone, though, so don't assume that because an agent is not on there, he's legitimate.

In addition to becoming knowledgeable about specific agents, it's important that you understand, in a broader sense, some ways that an agent might take advantage of you, so that you will always know what to look out for when signing with (or approaching) an agent. To this end, let's explore five common illegitimate practices out there:

### **Five Ways an Agent Can Take Advantage of You.**

1. Charge a reading fee.

There is a divide in the agenting world between agents who charge a "reading fee" and agents who do not. A reading fee means that this agent will request that you pay him a stipulated fee if you want him to read your manuscript to consider for representation. I would never advise that you do

this. It is not completely impossible for this agent to potentially represent you and land you a deal, but I would say that it is highly unlikely. Legitimate agents do not charge reading fees. I have, many times, been offered exorbitant amounts of money by potential authors in the hopes that I will give special consideration to their manuscript. I have always refused. It is a matter of ethics.

There is no reason why you, as an author, should have to pay a fee just to be considered—especially when there are so many agents who will consider your work without charging any fees.

## 2. Charge an editing fee.

A trickier way for an agent to charge you is to classify himself as a “non fee-charging agent,” read your manuscript for free, then turn around and tell you that he likes it, but it needs editing—and inform you that you will have to pay an editing fee if you want him (or his agency) to edit it. This, too, is an illegitimate practice, and you should not pay it, or have any further dealings with such an agent. It is also a waste of time: with such agents, the vast majority of the time you will pay the editing fee, he will edit it (usually in the form of simply giving you a one page critique), you will submit the revised manuscript, and he will then inform you that he doesn’t like the revised

manuscript and cannot represent it. Or he will tell you it needs more edits, and you will have to pay another fee.

### 3. Get a kickback by referring you to a book doctor.

Some agents will be even more subtle, and instead of outright charging you an editing fee, they will say that they cannot edit your manuscript themselves, and will instead refer you to a freelance editor (or “book doctor”). The agent will lead you to believe that this book doctor will be able to edit your manuscript in such a way as to markedly improve it, and will lead you to believe that if you use this book doctor’s services, the agent will then want to represent you. The book doctor will charge you an exorbitant fee, and edit your manuscript; you will then submit the revised manuscript to the agent, and the agent will reject it. The book doctor will then, in many cases, quietly give the agent a percentage of the fee you paid him—a kickback. It is a scam, and they are both in on it. Thus be very wary of any agent who refers you to any editor as a prerequisite to representation.

That said, this issue is not always so black and white. For one, there are indeed many legitimate book doctors out there. Two, it is not the agent’s job to edit, and many agents are not inclined to edit (and/or don’t know how). Thus there are indeed some instances when a legitimate agent might refer you to a legitimate book doctor. In such a scenario, though, it is unlikely that the

agent will refer you to a specific person, or to just one person. Indeed, if an agent simply tells you that your manuscript needs revision and doesn't name anyone specific to do the work, then you can feel much more assured.

### **To Use a Book Doctor?**

The issue of whether or not to employ a freelance editor, or book doctor, may arise before you even begin to search for an agent. There are many authors who seek out book doctors before their agent search, without having any referral from an agent. They decide on their own that they need to have their work “professionally edited” in advance (usually for a high fee). They think that doing this will impress an agent and help increase their chances of landing one.

First of all, from an agent’s perspective, I can tell you that if I read in a query letter that a manuscript has been “professionally edited” in advance, not only does it not impress me, but it actually makes me even more wary of the quality of the manuscript. In all my years, I have never encountered a single unsolicited manuscript that was “professionally edited” that I thought was of better quality than the others, or good enough to represent. So don’t hire a freelance editor on your own if you are only doing so to impress an agent.

It's hard to outright state that you should never employ a freelance editor, because there may be some cases where a freelance editor does a great job with an author's manuscript for a very low fee. However, in the vast majority of cases, I would not recommend you hire one. Instead, it's far better to build a small group of trusted readers who are also good editors, and who can offer you notes. And, of course, to learn to edit yourself.

#### 4. Charge exorbitant agency expenses.

Some agents get even trickier—they won't charge a reading fee, or an editing fee, and they will even go so far as to offer you representation. Once you are “represented,” they will then send you an upfront invoice for “expenses” they will incur in your submission. These expenses will often be exorbitant, and are simply a masked way of charging you a fee. They will take your check for expenses, then end up either never submitting the work, or submitting it to only one or two (inappropriate) publishers. Stay far away from any such agent, and before you sign an agency agreement, make sure you protect yourself from this scenario (more on this below).

But keep in mind that agency expenses are not always a sign of a scam. There are indeed many legitimate agents who will ask to be reimbursed for certain specific office expenses (i.e. photocopying, postage) from clients

whom they have already agreed to represent. However, this will always come in the form of a detailed invoice, and will only be *directly* related to the submission of your work—and should come only after your work has already been submitted widely to a list of appropriate publishers. But this should be clearly agreed upon in advance of your signing an agreement with the agency.

#### 5. Withhold your advance or royalty money.

Perhaps the most insidious of all illegitimate agency practices is when an agent signs you, gets you a deal, and then withholds or outright steals all or a portion of the money due you from the publisher (or from any other source of income, such as a magazine or foreign publisher). This is rare, but unfortunately it can happen. The reason this is possible is that the industry etiquette is that publishers pay all monies due an author to the agent; the agent then deducts his 15% commission, turns around and cuts a check to the author for the remaining 85%. Some unscrupulous agents can either hold that money for weeks or months too long, or never pay it to an author at all.

To avoid this happening, first, let me teach you a little bit about when monies, in general, should land. First, your publishing agreement will stipulate both the size of your advance, how many installments it will be paid in, and when. Read this carefully. Publishers these days tend to pay advances in at least three (or more) installments: for example, one third on signing, one third

on delivery of your manuscript, and one third on publication. If the advance is smaller, you might get paid in halves (half on signing, half on delivery), and if it is larger, you might get paid in quarters, fifths or sixths, with the payments stretched out as long as possible.

Once you sign a publisher's agreement and send it in, your first check should land within roughly 2 weeks of that time. Certainly no longer than 4 weeks. If you haven't received your check from your agent by then, something is likely wrong, and you should inquire. Similarly, with each step of the way (delivery, publication), your check should be paid within two to four weeks. (Keep in mind, though, that the delivery check is not due until your manuscript has been delivered and *accepted*, and thus you won't be paid until you have delivered your *revision*, assuming the publisher requested edits.)

Royalty checks (if any) should lance twice a year, every six months, like clockwork. Even if no check is due, your statement should land. If not, inquire.

More subtle than this is the disbursement of foreign monies. If your agent controls world rights, his co-agents will attempt to sell the translation rights to your book around the world. When they are successful, they will send the money due you to your agent. But it can take years to sell foreign rights, and many months after that to get paid. It is too easy to lose track of this complex process. There are some unscrupulous agents that will receive money due you

from their international co-agents and hold it for months and/or outright take it. This is very rare, but it can happen. In general, when you sign a foreign publisher's agreement, know that your advance check should arrive within approximately 90 days of signing. If not, inquire.

So be thorough when researching agents upfront. The more reputable clients they represent, the less likely they will be up to anything unethical.

### **The Agency Agreement.**

If you are offered representation, you will likely be requested to sign an agency agreement. Do not take this lightly: if there is anything worse than not landing an agent, it is landing an agent who is ineffectual, and your book being bound to him forever. Such concerns should escalate in proportion to your lack of knowledge of the agent or agency, or in proportion to your level of discomfort with (or lack of understanding of) the agreement you are requested to sign. Again, the more familiar you are with the agent, his agency and his clients, the less you'll have to worry. But it's quite possible that you'll be offered representation by an agent you're largely unfamiliar with, and whose clients you've never heard of. What then?

If you are asked to sign an agency agreement and you are unfamiliar with the agency or cannot easily verify the agency's track record, you might want to

first show the agreement to a publishing or entertainment attorney, or to some other industry expert (if you are a member of the Authors Guild, they will provide a free service in this regard). If you do not have the funds or access to do this and are intent on moving ahead with the agent, then here are a few basic tips to help protect you in the agreement:

### **7 Ways to Protect Yourself in an Agency Agreement.**

#### 1. An exit clause.

The strongest level of protection you can have is an “exit” clause, which gives you the right to terminate the agreement, say with 30 (or 60 or 90) days notice. With such a clause, you can always terminate an agreement if things go wrong; without one, you can be bound to that agent for that book forever. This is also the hardest clause to get an agent to agree to. If you request one, most agents will balk, since when they submit your book, some publishers may take six months (or longer) to respond. An agent doesn’t want to submit your book, have you whimsically terminate, then have a publisher come back with an offer four months later. There are ways to compromise, to protect both author and agent, for example a clause which states that an agent can supply you with the specific submission list at termination time and that if any of those publishers end up making an offer (even months down the road), the

agent will get his commission. Although an agent may or may not agree to this, in any case, even if you can an exit clause with 120 or 180 days notice, it's still better than not having one at all. So ask for one.

## 2. Limiting the term.

If you are unable to get the above clause, the next best thing would be to request language which limits the agency agreement to a specific time period (for instance, one year) with a mutually agreeable option to renew. Again, agents don't like to put time limits on author agreements because it can take a week or a year to sell your manuscript. Sometimes an agent will submit a book, get 30 rejections, and it will sit there—then, two years later, he will have lunch with an editor who suddenly wants it. So this is understandable, and if your agent is an excellent, reputable agent and is willing to keep plugging your book two years later, then you are actually very fortunate. On the other hand, you don't want to be in the position where your agent is not good at what he does, has barely submitted your book and/or has sent it to the wrong people, and you are bound to his having an indefinite time to represent it.

So as a compromise, request that your agent put a one year time limit on the agreement (this time limit only applies if they haven't sold it—if they do make a sale, then it is standard that the agreement will be for the life of the book publishing contract). Most agents in most cases should know if they are

able to sell a book within one year, so they should have no real reason to balk at this.

If you are unable to get an agent to agree to an exit clause and also unable to get him to put any time limit on the agreement, then you will have a tough decision to make. If it is a reputable agency, then there is not as much to worry about; if not, though, you have a lot to worry about. In such a case, I would advise not signing.

### 3. Limiting the number of books.

Many agencies will try to get you to sign an agreement which states that they represent everything you write within a certain time period (say, three years), or which states that they will represent you for several books. Their rationale is that, if they put hard work into launching your career and you repay them by leaving them for your next book, then they should also be entitled to commission your future book(s). I would suggest you firmly requesting that any agency agreement be limited to just one book, though. Of course, if your agent does a great job for you, you should be loyal and stay with them for future books. But if you are unhappy with your agent, then you should have the legal option of not using him for future books.

### 4. Limiting the genre.

As a further protection, you can request language which specifies that the agency will only represent you in a particular genre. If you are writing fiction, for example, you can request the agreement only limit you to fiction (the same with non-fiction). The more specific and limited an agreement is, the more options it gives you to not be bound to that agent for future books. Even if you have no intention of writing in a different genre, one never knows what the future may bring. Again, if your agent does an excellent job for you, then you should stay with him regardless of the genre—but if not, it's good to have the legal option to go elsewhere.

##### 5. Specifying sole authorship.

While you may not have any intention of ever collaborating with someone on a book, one never knows what the future may bring. It could be that you write books on your own for years, and then one day a writer friend you respect asks you to partner on a book. It could happen that you meet a celebrity or successful businessman who wants you to collaborate and tell his story. Anything can happen. If your agency agreement specifies that you are only bound to your agency for “solely-authored books,” then this gives you an out clause if you should not desire to work with your agent on the collaboration project. It also can spare you a messy situation, for example, your writer friend has his own rival agent, and each agency lays claim to the

commission. Your agent may or may not agree to this, and if you are happy with your agent, then you should indeed stay loyal and use him for any project, collaboration or not. But if things go sour, this gives you one more layer of protection.

Alternately, if your current book is a collaboration, and you are collaborating with your friend John Smith, then you can request that the agency agreement specify that the agency only represents you on books which you author specifically “in collaboration with John Smith.” Again, this allows you a future out in case you should ever want to author books on your own and/or if you should ever want to partner with somebody else on a different project and you don’t want to use your current agent.

#### 6. Key man clause.

There are cases where an author signs with an agency because a particular agent within that agency likes his work. After he signs, that particular agent leaves the agency and wants to take the author with him to his new agency. But he can’t, because the author has signed an agreement with the agency, not the particular agent, and he can’t terminate it. This author then finds himself handed off to a different agent at the agency—often, one who does not share the same passion for his work as the agent who originally signed him.

Thus, when signing an agency agreement, try to get language inserted which specifies that if your particular agent leaves the agency, then you will have the right to terminate the agreement (also known as a “key man clause”). This won’t be easy to get: most agencies will refuse this request, as they don’t want to run the risk of having a particular agent leave and take all of his clients with him. Still, it can’t hurt to try.

#### 7. Capping expenses.

If your agency agreement specifies that you will have to reimburse the agency for legitimate expenses, then try to get a cap put on those expenses (for example, \$250 or \$500). If not, then technically, an agency could rack up thousands in exorbitant expenses and hand you the bill.

### **To Hire an Attorney?**

This is not an easy question to answer. To help illustrate what a tricky issue this can be, let me offer you four scenarios:

Scenario One: An author signs with a young agent who has little experience with publishing agreements. This author decides not to hire his own attorney. The author signs a long, complex agency agreement binding him to the agency for several years, and for his next several books. The young

agent is successful in getting the author a deal, but the agent does not really know how to vet the publishing agreement thoroughly, and the author ends up signing a long, complex publishing agreement that has many undesirable clauses. Shortly afterward, this agent quits, and the author is assigned another agent in the agency who he does not particularly like. The author now finds himself bound to an agency he does not like for his next several books, and also bound to a substandard publishing agreement. If he had just hired his own attorney to protect his interests and had spent, for example, \$2,000 on legal fees, he could have been spared a bad agency agreement, and a bad publishing agreement, and he could be free to go elsewhere for his next several books.

Scenario Two: An excellent, reputable agent decides to take a chance on an unknown author and offer him representation. He offers the author an agency agreement. This author decides to hire his own attorney to vet the agency agreement. The attorney takes six weeks to respond, which annoys the agent, who had been excited to work with the author and eager to proceed six weeks prior. The agent has also moved onto other projects since, and no longer has the opening of free time he had six weeks prior. The attorney's response is overzealous, a six page letter, packed with 35 issues he'd like to see changed in the one-page agency agreement. The agent, fed up, decides to rescind his offer

of representation. The author is unable to find another agent. To cap it off, the attorney sends the author a \$5,000 bill for “services.”

Scenario Three: An excellent, reputable agent does a terrific job for an author and lands him a \$700,000 advance for his book. When the publisher issues the agreement, the agent goes over it in his usual form, and has dozens of small points changed on the author’s behalf. The agent has negotiated the small points to yield an excellent publishing agreement as well. The author, though, not completely trusting the agent, decides he must hire his own attorney. He does so, and his attorney takes four months to respond to the publisher. The attorney ends up sending the publisher a ten page letter, requesting over 100 changes. The publisher says No to all of them. The author ends up signing the contract the agent had already negotiated. And his attorney sends him a \$10,000 bill for services.

Scenario Four: The same as Scenario Three, except when they are three months into waiting for the attorney to respond, the acquiring editor who offered \$700,000 quits, and the publisher informs the agent and author that they have changed their mind about the book, and rescind their offer altogether. Since nothing has been signed, the author and agent have little recourse but to try to sell it elsewhere. The agent shops it around again. This time, though, he is only able to sell it for a \$10,000 advance.

These four scenarios help shed some light on how difficult it is to advise an author whether or not to hire his own attorney. If he doesn't, it could end up (as in scenario one) that he does himself a great disservice; if he does, it can end up that he severely jeopardizes his relationship with his agent and publisher. I have seen all of these types of scenarios happen—and thus it's hard to give blanket advice.

Ultimately, it depends a lot on the attorney you choose. If you decide to hire one, be very careful to choose one who 1) offers a very fast response time, since agents and editors come and go all the time, and once a deal is in place it must be closed immediately; 2) won't surprise you with exorbitant fees; 3) is thorough but not over-zealous; 4) realizes how hard it is to land an agent (and a publishing deal) to begin with, and keeps this in mind, and is thus a deal-maker and not a deal-breaker; 5) is friendly, good-natured and easy to get along with; and 6) most importantly, is an expert specifically in book publishing (as opposed to a general "entertainment" attorney). I have encountered too many entertainment attorneys who know a lot about entertainment contracts in general, but very little about book publishing agreements. Book publishing agreements are a very special niche, and you either know them or you don't. I have done nearly 250 agreements with nearly every major publisher and imprint (not counting hundreds of foreign contracts, film options, and various subsidiary rights contracts)—and even

with all that experience, I always learn something new. In most cases, veteran agents tend to know book publishing contracts better than attorneys. If you are confident in your agent's experience and reputation, the chances are that you won't need to hire your own attorney.

Now you know how to research agents thoroughly, how to approach them, how to follow up, and how to protect yourself. Let's, finally, turn to a topic which is rarely discussed but incredibly important: how to work with an agent once you've landed him.

PART III:  
AFTER THE STORM

# Chapter 8:

## How to Keep Your Agent (and When to Let Him Go)

Many writing guides discuss how to write a query letter, how to write a proposal, how to query an agent. But few discuss one of the most important aspects of publishing: how to work with an agent on a daily basis. I have not, in fact, seen any guides that discuss this important topic from an agent's perspective. It is as if the writing guides believe that once you land an agent, the quest is finished, and there is nothing more to do, and that now it is okay to throw caution to the wind. Many authors have this frame of mind, too, approaching agents in very crass and aggressive ways, and assuming that as long as they land them, nothing else matters. Nothing can be further from the truth.

In this chapter, I will teach you how to keep an agent—from an agent's perspective—and give you valuable information that will help you work happily with your agent for many years. And since it is a two-way relationship, I will also teach you how to know if your agent is ineffective, and when to let him go.

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A big part of the reason why the author/agent relationship can break down is because most authors don't know what to expect once they have been signed by an agent. They can enter the relationship with inflated expectations, and set themselves up for disappointment. They can have misconceptions about what agents do, and find themselves disappointed. Or they can be in the dark completely, and if they find themselves with an agent who is non-responsive or not good at explaining the process, they can feel increasingly in the dark and frustrated—sometimes unnecessarily, sometimes rightfully so.

The best way to rectify all of this is for me to teach you, in depth, about what agents truly do and about what the publishing process is really like, from the moment you sign with an agent until the moment your book publishes. I'm going to take some time first to give you a broad overview of what it's like to work with an agent, so that you are fully informed and can know exactly what to expect. This knowledge alone will make a huge difference in getting your relationship off to a healthy start, and in keeping it strong.

### **What it's Like to Work With an Agent (a Step-by-Step Timeline).**

Once an agent offers you representation and you accept, the next step (for most agencies) is to issue you an agency agreement. Once you sign this, the relationship officially begins. At that point, if the agent feels your proposal or

manuscript needs work before it's ready to submit, he might ask you to make changes first. If an agent is very busy, it may take him weeks until he has a chance to re-read your manuscript and write you an editorial letter (or mark it up with line-edits); if he has more time, he might get to it within days. It depends on how long your work is, on how much work it needs, and on how zealous the agent is with edits. It can range from just an informal phone call right after he signs you, asking you to make a few light changes, to an agent's spending months writing a long, detailed editorial letter and completely marking up the manuscript. Some agents will even want to go through a second or third round of edits before they feel a manuscript is ready. It really all depends on the working style of the agent. With some agents, your work might go out to publishers the day he signs you, while with others, it can be six months later, after several rounds of edits.

Thus if an agent offers to represent you, you might first want to ask him the following questions, so that you know what to expect: 1) will he request edits? 2) how extensive will they be? 3) how long will it take until you receive them? and 4) when does he expect to do the submission? You might be surprised to learn that the agent feels it needs extensive edits and/or that he's too busy to submit your work for the next three months. In fact, if another (equally good) agent likes your manuscript as is and is ready to submit it the following week, that might make the difference in who you choose. Either

way, by asking these questions, at least you will know what to expect, and you won't sit their in the dark, or be surprised when edits land.

I would say that in the majority of cases, most agents who take on a new project only do so if they feel light (or no) edits are required, and thus it would be fairly unusual to be put through an extensive editing process—especially because an agent's time is precious, and most agents won't want to take on projects to begin with if they know it needs a lot of edits. Additionally, most of the time when an agent takes on a new project, he is excited, and thinks he can sell it *now*, which means that most agents are often eager to submit as soon as possible. So in general, you could probably expect light or no edits, and then for your manuscript to be submitted within a few weeks of your being signed.

Once an agent feels your work is ready to submit, the next thing he will do is create a submission list of appropriate publishers. Most agents should be able to do this fairly quickly—usually within a day. Agents usually will not consult with you when creating the list, for several reasons: 1) they know editors far better than you (which is why you hired them to begin with); 2) they won't want to put themselves into a position where they can be second-guessed and micromanaged by you (more on this later); and 3) they won't want to put themselves into a position where, during the submission, an author knows the name of every editor considering it, in case for some reason

the author ends up acting erratically, such as taking it upon himself to call every editor on that list and try to pitch it himself (and/or yell at each editor for rejecting it). When the submission is over, though, most agents will supply you with a copy of the list at that point. So don't feel worried if you are kept in the dark as far as exactly who is seeing it during the submission process.

The timing of the submission process itself can vary greatly, depending on what's being submitted, how widely it's been submitted, which agent is submitting it, and which editor is reading it. If the submission comprises a 10 page proposal, for example, it will get read much more quickly; if it comprises a 500 page novel, it will take longer. Keep in mind that if an editor likes your work, he will often have to share it with his colleagues to get their approval, too, before making an offer—thus you have to take into account the time it takes for multiple people to read it in staggered stages. If your agent submits your work to 40 publishers at once, the submission will conclude much more quickly; if he is sending it to only three publishers at a time on a 40 publisher list, then a submission can drag on for years. If your agent is very well respected, editors might just stop everything and read it: your work can get read within hours of its being submitted, and sometimes an offer can be made just as quickly. If your agent is unknown or not respected, his submissions may not be looked at for months. If a particular editor on the submission list

tends to give fast responses, that will affect the process; likewise if an editor tends to be particularly slow.

Taking all of the above into consideration, you can see why it's not easy to give a blanket time as to how long a submission takes to play out. That said, if I had to generalize, I would say that, on average, a standard non-fiction proposal of about 30 pages, sent in by a generally well-respected agent, will usually get read by all of the editors on the list within 4 to 6 weeks, and it will be read by many of them within the first few days. If the submission is a standard 350 page novel, it will be read by most of the people on the list within 8—12 weeks, and by many of them within 2—4 weeks.

Thus, now that you know this, don't call your agent after your novel has been submitted for one day and ask him if it's sold yet (more on this below); likewise, if he's submitted a 20 page proposal and it's been 6 months and you have heard nothing, absolutely do call (more on this, too, below).

If you and your agent are so lucky to have a publisher make an offer, there will follow a brief period of negotiation between agent and editor, as they hash out the major terms of the deal (advance, royalties, major subsidiary rights, etc.). This process can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days. If multiple publishers are bidding, this process can hypothetically drag on for a couple of weeks, although that is unusual.

Once the major terms of the deal are verbally agreed upon between agent and editor, you officially have a deal. Even though nothing has been signed yet, in the publishing industry verbal agreements like these are considered rock-solid, and the deal is considered done (it would be terrible publishing etiquette to go back on a deal at this point, and there could even be legal implications). Thus you can rest assured that you do have a deal.

The next stage is waiting for the long, formal publishing agreement to be issued. This can take anywhere from 2 to 12 weeks.

Once the contract lands, your agent will likely review it and ask the publisher's contracts department to make minor changes to the language throughout. This minor wrangling can last anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. If you bring in your own attorney, it can take even longer.

Once the contract language is agreed upon, final signing contracts are issued, and you sign. The publisher countersigns, and within another 2 to 4 weeks, your first check should land, which will be for the advance portion due on signing.

You then go off and write the rest of the book (if you've sold it based on a finished manuscript, then this stage is obviously skipped). Alternately, you can get a head start by starting to write the rest of the book as soon as your agent makes the verbal deal. Most authors do this, since it can sometimes take months from the time your agent verbally makes a deal until the time the

publishing agreement is actually signed, and you can get a big head start this way. In either case, publishers will want you to deliver the finished manuscript as soon as possible, since they are advancing you money and will be eager to publish and recoup it. The average contract will give you approximately 6 to 12 months to deliver. (Some authors take much longer, and others deliver more quickly.)

Once you deliver the finished manuscript, the editor will take about 2 to 10 weeks to read it and respond with edits. If he has no edits (rare), your manuscript will be put right into the production process. If he has light edits, you will go off and work on the revision. If his edits are heavier, he may put you through two or more revisions. In any case, you won't be paid the advance portion due on "Delivery and Acceptance" when you deliver your first draft (as most authors mistakenly believe) but rather when your manuscript has actually been *accepted*—which could mean after several revisions, if your editor happens to be painstaking or if he happens to think your manuscript needs a lot of work.

As far as the agent's role in all of this, some agents will read your delivered manuscript; others won't. Some will offer you editorial comments; others won't. Some agents will want you to deliver it to them first, have them read it, and have them feel it's in good enough shape to deliver first; others will want you to just deliver it directly to your editor. Again, it really all depends on the

particular agent. Some authors are offended if an agent doesn't read their delivered manuscript; other authors are offended if an agent *does* read it and offers comments with which they don't agree. Some authors don't want their agent's opinion on the finished manuscript, while others will feel that they can't deliver it without it.

From an agent's perspective, it is very time consuming to read finished and delivered manuscripts, especially if an author wants you to read multiple versions after each revision. Agents are incredibly busy just trying to survive, which means reading through stacks of new proposals to decide what to represent, and getting these proposals into shape for submission. From many agents' perspectives, they have already done their job by landing you the deal (not an easy feat), and it is not their job to also act as your editor and read your finished manuscript and/or to offer you edits. It is not only very time consuming, but the reading time spent on it (an agent's most scarce asset) represents time and money lost for the agent, since the agent doesn't earn any additional income by reading a finished manuscript for a book deal already in place.

Additionally, it can backfire. Instead of an author thanking his agent to take the time to read the finished manuscript, an author can end up instead being angry at his agent because he doesn't like the agent's comments or reaction to the manuscript. In this case, not only has an agent lost his time

reading the manuscript, but he ends up with an author who is ungrateful and even upset with him—which may even jeopardize their relationship. (Then again, an author can be upset with an agent for *not* reading the finished manuscript!)

Most importantly, though, the *editor* is the one who ultimately decides whether a manuscript is acceptable, not the agent, and agents realize this. An agent can spend weeks reading a finished manuscript, offer comments, the author can go off and revise accordingly and then deliver to the editor, and the editor can offer an entirely conflicting set of comments. The author will, rightfully, be frustrated. This is one of the reasons some agents will simply leave it up to the editor to read and evaluate the finished manuscript. Sometimes having too many chefs in the kitchen is not a good thing.

So if your agent doesn't read your finished manuscript, don't get offended. Remember that the agent's primary job is to get you a deal (which he's done), and he has already performed it. And from an author's perspective, if one had to choose, it is better to have an agent who will forward your finished manuscript immediately to the editor (or have you deliver it directly to him), so as not to hold up the delivery time, delivery check, or publication date—and not set you up for conflicting comments—than it is to have an agent who insists on reading it first and putting his stamp on it with extensive comments which may or may not be helpful.

Once your manuscript is officially “accepted,” there follows a period of about six to nine months until publication date. In that time your publisher will put you through many small production stages, such as copyedits, proofs of the galleys, catalogue and jacket copy. A few months before publication date, the publicity will begin to get setup. When the book publishes, you will know how many copies the publisher has printed and shipped, and within a few months of pub date you should have a good idea of how it’s selling, and whether they are going back for another printing. Within 6 to 9 months of pub date, the returns will come in (copies which never sold and which are returned to the publisher by the bookstore), and that is the point when you will know how many copies the book *truly* sold (for example, a book can print 10,000 copies, ship 8,000, and 6 months later, 6,000 can get returned—leaving you with 2,000 copies actually sold). Usually the publisher will publish a paperback edition about one year after the hardcover edition, which gives you another chance for success.

Here is a helpful timeline, which lays this all out at a glance:

### **Publication Timeline (from the time an agent offers representation)**

#### **Before the agent sells the book:**

- 1—2 weeks: Agent asks for edits {if applicable}
- 1—4 weeks: You edit {if applicable}
- 1—4 weeks: Agent is ready to submit
- 1—12 weeks: Submission period

1—12 weeks: Round 2 {if applicable}

**If the agent receives an offer from a publisher:**

1—7 days: Agent negotiates advance

2—8 weeks: Publisher drafts contract

1—4 weeks: Agent negotiates minor contract changes

1 day: You sign the publishing contract

2—4 weeks: Your advance check (portion due on signing) arrives

**After you sign the publishing contract:**

6—18 months: You write the manuscript {assuming you sold a proposal}

2—12 weeks: Editor reads it and sends editorial letter

1—3 months: You work on edits

2—6 weeks: Editor reads edited manuscript and {if applicable} sends second editorial letter

1 month: You work on second round of edits

2 weeks: Editor reads revised manuscript and (hopefully) approves it

**After your manuscript is approved:**

2—4 weeks: Your advance check (portion due on delivery) lands

6—8 weeks: You review and correct several passes of your manuscript (copyedits, typeset manuscript, etc.)

3—6 months before pub date: Your bound galleys arrive {if applicable}, and your PR campaign begins

6—18 months after D&A: Your book is published!

**After your book is published:**

3 months after Pub: You should have a good idea of the sales rate

9 months after Pub: You should have a good idea of net sales (after returns have come in)

12—18 months after Pub: The Paperback Edition {if applicable}

By studying the above timetable, you will be much more educated about the process, and thus will feel more informed and relaxed when dealing with your agent. However, as you can see, the timeline can vary dramatically, as there are so many variables. The biggest issues affecting timing are how long the submission takes (I have sold some books in a few hours, and others after years of submission), how long it takes you to write your book (I have sold finished manuscripts that were ready to go to press and I have sold brief

proposals after which it took the author six years to deliver the finished manuscript), how much editing your editor wants (I have sold books where the editor didn't touch a word, and others where he sent a 100 page editorial letter), and when the publisher schedules to publish the accepted manuscript (I have seen publishers rush a finished manuscript to publication in three months, and others wait three years before publishing). No two books are the same.

### **The Agent's Role in the Timeline.**

In most cases, the bulk of the agent's job comes in the early stages of the process, in getting you to the point in the timeline where you can sign the publishing agreement. If an agent has done all of the early steps well—got your proposal into shape (and/or helped you brainstorm the right concept), created a great submission list, landed you a deal, negotiated you a great advance and royalties, negotiated you a great contract—he has done a great job for you. He technically needn't do anything else, since he has already accomplished what most agents can't.

Many authors don't realize this, and this is the source of much author frustration with agents—and likewise, agents' frustration with authors. Many authors believe that all of the above is just the *beginning* of an agent's job, and

that he must also be the book's editor, and publicist, that he must be available for constant consultation all throughout the writing, editing and publication process. Agents, in turn, can feel frustrated that an author has not acknowledged that the agent has already done his job well, and that the author keeps demanding more and more from him throughout the rest of the process. There are certainly times where things go wrong and an agent is needed after the author has signed the publishing agreement: for example, there might be a dispute between the author and editor, or the editor can quit or get fired, or the publisher can cancel the book, or the author can be late in delivering (or not deliver at all)—but aside from flare-ups and unusual situations, in most cases, the agent's job is mostly done early on.

The time when an agent's primary role surfaces again is when it comes time to strategize the concept and the timing of submission for your next book. For some authors, the first book will have been sold based upon a finished manuscript, and they will be ready to turn to their next book immediately—and thus the agent's job will begin all over again immediately. Other authors will not deliver a finished manuscript for a year or more, and some will not even want to think of writing another book for another year or two (or may not have a good concept for one). A good agent should have you thinking about your next book as soon as your editor formally accepts your

current book. It is not his role to give you a concept or to brainstorm with you, but if he does, it is an added plus.

It is his role, though, to give you a feel for what the current marketplace is, for what concepts of yours may or may not sell, and to help steer you in the right direction. It is also his role to let you know when the best possible time may be to submit your next book to your publisher. And it is his role to make sure you properly adhere to the option clause of your book publishing agreement (which stipulates that your publisher has the legal right to consider your next book first and exclusively), to guide you through the option period, and to advise you whether to accept a publisher's option offer or not. If so, you will enter into another deal with your publisher; if not, the agent submits your next book elsewhere, and you go through the entire process again.

Now that you have a good overview of the process, let's look at specific ways you can assure a positive relationship with your agent.

### **15 Ways to Assure a Great Relationship With Your Agent.**

1. Don't be too demanding on his time.

This is probably the #1 reason why most agent/author relationships fall apart. Many authors view an agent as someone they can lean on heavily,

someone they can call multiple times a day, can reach at night or on the weekends, someone they can vent to, someone who will read any and all drafts of all of their work, at nights, on weekends, over holidays--someone they can email five times a day. They view the agent as someone who is there entirely and totally for them only, imagining that they are his only client. It is as if they view the agent/author relationship to be short-term and high burn out.

If you want a long-term relationship with your agent, then being demanding on his time is the biggest mistake you can make. "Long term" are the key words. If you view your relationship with your agent not as lasting for one year but for 20, then you will likely pace yourself more and be more discrete in using up too much of his time too quickly.

Even if your agent loves you and your work, he has to make a living, which means he has to juggle dozens of clients and to also constantly seek out new business. There is simply no way he can devote too much time to any one client, and if he finds that he is doing so, he will reevaluate that client. From an agent's perspective, the financial stakes for any given author are usually low: many authors generate advances of only \$30,000 (if at all), and never earn royalties beyond that. For the agent, that means a 15% commission of only \$4,500, for two or three years of work on that book. If the agent works for an agency, the agency may take half, and thus for a \$30,000 advance and no

royalties, the agent earns a total of \$2,250 for *years* of work. This scenario is all too common.

The agent will continue to represent this client because he believes in his work and because he hopes one day the client will earn royalties or land a major advance for subsequent books. But this rarely happens. If you are Stephen King and earning a 20 million dollar advance per book, then yes, you have the right to be the agent's only client and to demand all of his time. But if you are not, then you have to realize that, despite your success, you may be generating very little money for your agent, and you may even be lucky he's continuing to represent you. Even if you earn a \$100,000 advance (which may seem very large to you) you still only earn your agent a \$15,000 commission (or \$7,500 if he works for an agency) for *years* of his time and work. Few people can make a living on that.

If you are considerate and sparing with his time and are easy to work with, then he will want to keep working with you, regardless. If you become demanding or time-consuming, though, he will start to reevaluate. I've represented some authors who I'd hear from only once every three years, when their next novel was finished; I've represented other authors who called several times a day and emailed several times more, who demanded I read their manuscript immediately, overnight, on a holiday. You can guess which relationship lasted.

This is not to say you should be terrified to ever contact your agent. There are legitimate times when you will need to, and if your agent is non-responsive during such times, then the problem is with *him*, not you, and in that case, you are the one who should

be reevaluating the relationship (more on this later). But as a rule of thumb, refrain from contacting your agent unless you absolutely need to. I assure you that this is the key to a healthy long-term relationship.

## 2. Don't micromanage.

The publishing industry is a subtle and complex one, one that takes years of full-time effort to master. One of the biggest mistake authors make is assuming they know the industry as well as their agents do: because they've read up on it, maybe attended a few conferences, perhaps made a few contacts, they assume that they know what to do as well as their agent, and are in a position to micromanage. This tends to especially hold true of authors who have had a few book deals over the years. They don't consider that their perspective is in fact very narrow: while they may have had a few book deals, their agents will have negotiated *hundreds* of deals with dozens of publishers. For example, I've seen authors who demanded to see my submission list before I did a submission, who went over it and second-guessed it, who recommended adding other (inappropriate) editors to it, and who continued

to second-guess me at every step of the process. I've seen other authors second-guess me when I landed them a great six figure advance, wondering whether it should have been for even *higher* six figures.

Few things will annoy an agent more than an author who tries to tell them what to do and how to do it every step of the way. Your job as an author is to do your research and choose a great agent. Once you've chosen him, trust your judgement in the choice, and get out of the way. A good, experienced agent will know volumes more about the publishing industry than you will ever know, and will consider many factors you hadn't thought of with every decision he makes on your behalf, whether it's his choice of editors on the submission list, or his choice of how much to counter-offer a publisher for your advance.

If you really want to be in the driver's seat, get a full-time job in the industry, learn it, and become an agent yourself. Otherwise, let your agent do his job.

### 3. Don't bring in a crew.

An agent who offers representation to an author expects to be representing one person (or, if a collaboration, two people). I have encountered authors who, after accepting my offer of representation, suddenly had their assistant call me in their stead; soon, I was hearing from their

attorney; later, from their manager; later, from their publicist, and then from their accountant. There have been other authors who decided along the way that they needed to bring in two friends in order to collaborate on the manuscript—and these friends automatically assumed that they, too, were my clients, and they started calling me more than my author. There were other authors who had a controlling spouse—and I ended up hearing more from the spouse than the author.

Don't bring in a crew. Give your agent the respect of working with you alone. If you have a team of people in your life, don't put them all on your agent—deal with them yourself. And if there is any possible way to avoid collaborating with a fellow author on a manuscript, then definitely avoid it: an agent would always rather work with one person than two. Two people is twice the work.

#### 4. Stay appreciative.

One of the best things you can do to keep a strong relationship with your agent over the years is to stay grateful and appreciative for the agent's efforts on your behalf. This sounds very simple, but is oft overlooked. Most authors tend to be grateful immediately in the wake of the agent's landing them their first book deal. But over time, too often an author forgets how he got where he is, and begins to take an agent's continual presence and work on his behalf

for granted. Many times an author's attitude towards an agent can even harden to one of resentment, at any number of things: that an agent is not returning one's call fast enough; that a fellow author landed a bigger advance; that your book didn't perform well; that the agent wasn't able to land you a second deal, or wasn't able to land you a second deal for as large of an advance. I've seen some authors list everyone they ever met in their Acknowledgments page except for their agent—the very person who got them the deal to begin with!

It is very simple to show your appreciation to your agent. Send him a holiday card (or small gift). Email him every once in a while to let him know how much you appreciate his hard work on your behalf. When your book publishes, sign a copy and mail it to him. These are very small things, but believe me, they can make a huge difference over time. The key is to shift your attitude from one of resentment to one of gratitude. In return, I guarantee you that your agent will end up working harder on your behalf, and that your relationship will last for many years.

##### 5. Stay loyal.

I represent an incredibly talented novelist who I took on 12 years ago. I submitted his first novel everywhere I could possibly think of. It didn't sell. I was very disappointed. Two years later he came to me with his second novel. I submitted that everywhere, too, and again, it didn't sell. Two years later, the

same happened again with his third novel. And two years after that, I submitted his fourth novel, and after 40-something rejections, I finally sold it. It took four novels and eight years of effort, but I finally achieved success on his behalf.

This novelist stayed loyal to me throughout all these years. He never blamed me for not landing him a deal—on the contrary, he knew I was doing the best possible job, and he remained incredibly grateful for my (unpaid) efforts year after year. It paid off for him—as I have landed him four book deals since. On the other hand, I have seen other authors leave and go to another agent after I was unable to sell their novel. The other agent couldn't sell it either (or their future books), and they remain unpublished to this day.

Sometimes you have to leave an ineffective agent, but other times your agent has done a great job and the marketplace simply said no—and no other agent would have been able to produce a different outcome. If your gut tells you he is doing a great job, then stay loyal.

#### 6. Don't cut your agent out of the loop.

Sometimes a little bit of success, power and fame can go to an author's head, and he can very quickly forget that his agent had a huge part in getting him there. I have seen cases where once an author lands his book deal and the agent introduces him to his editor, the author feels as if the editor is his

contact now and that he no longer needs the agent, and thus many months can go by with the author corresponding with his publisher and completely ignoring his agent or keeping him up to date. Sometimes an editor will call an agent and ask him what he thinks about the great news, and the agent will be embarrassed to report that his author didn't tell him and he doesn't know what it is.

Inevitably, one day something will go awry in the author/editor relationship, and the first call the author will make will be to his agent. But by then the agent could be so far out of the loop that there is little the agent can do to fix it. Or, commonly, the editor quits, and the author realizes he should have spent those months solidifying his relationship with his agent as much as his editor.

Always remember that your agent is your primary contact, at least as much as your editor. It is very common for one author to go through several editors and publishers, while remaining with the same agent. You should indeed develop a good working relationship with your editor, but you should also respectfully keep your agent up to date and in the loop.

## 7. Keep your relationship with your editor positive.

At the same token, it's important that you make an effort to keep your relationship with your editor positive. Some authors are careful not to flood

their agents with correspondence, but in lieu of this, they let loose all of their pent-up correspondence on their editors, flooding them with calls and novel-length emails. I've seen authors call their editor the day after they delivered their finished manuscript to ask if they'd read it yet, and I've seen other authors drop by their editor's office unannounced. Editors won't appreciate this. Like agents, they are incredibly overworked, and must juggle many authors at once. If any one author consumes too much of their time, it will become a problem. And if your editor has a problem with you, then your agent will hear about it. Your editor will end up looking for a reason not to work with you on your next book, which will make life much harder on your agent.

In addition to consuming an editor's time, some authors become outright argumentative or combative with their editors, fighting them every step of the way, whether it be on edits, the jacket art, the catalogue copy, the title, the publication date, etc. In general, they can simply become unpleasant to work with. Needless to say, don't do this. This doesn't mean you need to cave on every single editorial issue, but at the same token, do make an effort to be easy to work with and to keep your relationship cordial. More often than not, editors buy a second or third book from an author because they *want* to work with him, on a personal level.

#### 8. Deliver on time.

An author's not delivering on time can be a major headache for an agent.

When the agent lands the deal, he will check in with the author and ask him how much time he safely needs to deliver. If the author says, for example, 9 months, then the publisher will take that seriously, and plan the entire publication date around it. The book will be slated for a particular season, given one of a limited number of spots, plans will be made for its inclusion in the catalogue, and the production schedule will be mapped out accordingly all down the line. If an author is late, it causes a major problem (and sometimes expense) for a publisher. Indeed, publishers' agreements allow them to cancel the book if it is late.

It also reflects poorly on the agent, and strains his relationship with the publisher and editor. And it puts the agent's commission in doubt: advance payments are contingent on delivery, and if an author is late, an agent may not get paid. If the book is canceled because it is too late, the agent won't get the remaining commission checks due him, and will even have to pay back prior commission checks. The agent will not appreciate this.

Being a few weeks late is not a big deal—I have even seen many books work out fine that were a few months late. Then again, I have also seen books be canceled that were one month late. It all depends on how timely the book

is, and on the particular editor, publisher and season. As a rule of thumb, do everything in your power not to be late, and if you will be late, inform your editor (and agent) as far in advance as possible, and give your editor chunks of your manuscript along the way as they are ready.

#### 9. Deliver what you promised.

I've seen cases where the author contracted to deliver a 300 page book and delivered 180 pages, and the deal was canceled. When you sign a publishing agreement, it stipulates how many words you will deliver. This word count is a legal obligation, and should be taken very seriously. The contract should always go by word-count and not page-count, because this prevents any misunderstanding, as page-count can be altered by shrinking or expanding fonts or margins, while word count cannot be disputed. Don't sign the agreement if you don't feel confident that you can deliver at least the number of words the contract stipulates. (Delivering over word-count is rarely a problem, since an editor can simply cut.)

There are other delivery issues, too, which authors don't always consider. I've seen cases where an author contracted to deliver 8 pictures with the manuscript and he never delivered these pictures, and as a result, the book was canceled. There is typically a clause in the contract which stipulates what "supplementary material" will be delivered with the manuscript, such as

photos, illustrations, charts, maps, etc. Take this clause very seriously—it is as much of a legal obligation as the manuscript itself. Some authors, for example, carelessly agree to deliver 16 photos with a manuscript, not realizing that it can cost them, say, \$1,000 for permission to use each photograph. If you don't plan on delivering any supplementary material, then make sure this clause is deleted before signing.

Another major issue is permissions. If you quote any material in your book from another source, it is your responsibility to clear permission to use this material, and if required, to pay the requested fee. Not only can this get expensive, but it can be time-intensive: I have seen cases where a manuscript was delivered and ready to go to press, but the author hadn't yet cleared all of the permissions for all of the material he quoted, and thus the publication date was delayed (it can even be canceled). Permissions take months to clear, so start very early.

Finally, and most importantly, don't in your proposal promise to write a book about topic A and then deliver a book about topic B. Or don't deliver shoddy work. Editors are not stupid, and if you don't give them what was promised, they will cancel a book. Needless to say, this will not serve to strengthen your agent relationship.

10. Don't give your agent first drafts.

Some authors take the agent relationship for granted and become lazy, submitting early or rough drafts to the agent, and looking to him for continual feedback at every stage. This is incredibly time consuming for an agent, and will swallow up his reading time (the only asset he has), and prevent him from reading for new business. He will eventually resent you for it. Rough drafts of your work should be shown to your colleagues, to fellow authors and readers whom you respect--not to your agent. Showing your agent rough drafts will also subconsciously make him think less of your writing ability, as he is always reading rough drafts and not final, polished writing. Your agent should not be viewed as a sounding board for rough writing, but rather as someone who must always be impressed by polished writing.

#### 11. Don't fight him.

I once represented an author who asked me to read his manuscript and offer him comments. I did so. I loved it, and only suggested that he change a few sentences (of the 300 plus pages). He wrote back furious, insisting that those few sentences were perfect and needn't be changed.

Some authors have a tendency to fight their agents every step of the way, refusing to make edits, refusing to consider a title change, refusing to accept an advance that they don't think is big enough, refusing to sign a publishing agreement until the language suits their (unrealistic) needs, etc., etc. Don't be

this way. It gets exhausting for an agent very quickly. The agent is on your side, and he is out there every day fighting on your behalf, trying to land you a deal, and trying to land you the best possible terms. He doesn't want to have to come back after a long day of fighting on your behalf and find that he is fighting you, too.

If your agent has an idea for a title change, for example, consider it carefully, and agree if possible. The same holds true if he has ideas for edits. He is the one who has to go out there and sell your work, and he needs to feel 100% behind what he is selling. If he strongly advises you take an advance smaller than what you imagined, listen to him. (Of course, this all assumes that you have a well-respected agent who knows what he's doing. If his title change is absurd or if his edits are terrible, then don't cave in just for the sake of it.)

## 12. Don't only contact your agent when there are problems.

Many authors will forget to fill their agent in when they receive good news, but will pick up the phone and speed-dial him the instant there is a problem. This means that whenever the agent hears from the author, he can assume it's bad news. Over time, this will make the agent associate you with problems, and this is not how you want to be thought of. So remember your agent when good things happen. Agents can never hear enough from a client when it is good news that's being delivered.

### 13. Don't give out your agent's name easily.

Some authors think that, now that they have an agent, it is time to open the floodgates. They will phone seemingly every author they've ever met and give them their agent's name and mailing address and urge them to contact him. Dozens of bad manuscripts will land on the agent's desk, and when the agent receives yet another one, he will both be wary of the manuscript's quality, and start to get annoyed. Be very discriminating in who you choose to refer to your agent. It reflects on you.

At the same time, if you encounter a truly wonderful author, do indeed refer them to your agent. He will be appreciative.

### 14. Help supplement his efforts.

Many authors believe that once they land their agent, their career is set. They believe that all they have to do now is sit back and enjoy the ride. Not true. Selling books and remaining a successful author is a daily grind, and requires consistent effort on the author's part. Agents don't promote or publicize books—all they can do is land you the deal. You should help support your agent's efforts by doing everything possible, once you have the deal, to make sure that you really get behind your book. You should also continually work to build your credentials, to land new publicity, to increase

your platform, and to gather new endorsements. Don't look to your agent for everything. I've seen some authors who spent so much time out there networking that they managed on their own to dig up interest in film or magazine deals. Every little bit helps. When you bring activity to the table, your agent will feel as if you are supporting his efforts, and he will appreciate it.

#### 15. Seek his advice.

Some authors, after publishing a successful book, will disappear for months or years then suddenly resurface, dropping a finished 300 page manuscript on their agent's desk on a subject matter which is completely unsalable, or which is an inappropriate follow-up to their previous book. These authors never bothered to consult their agents at any point in the process, never bothered to seek their input as they considered various concepts.

One of the best things you can do as an author is to seek your agent's input after your current book is delivered and accepted, to ask your agent's advice on the marketability of various topics before jumping into any given one. Agents are on the frontline of what's selling every day, and they may be able to offer you a valuable suggestion to help tweak your concept before you set out to execute it; they can make you aware of competition you had no idea

about; or they might suggest you write on an entirely different topic altogether. They can also advise you write it sooner rather than later, or later rather than sooner.

When you seek an agent's input it is a sign of respect, a sign that you view your agent as more than just someone who can just land you a deal when the time comes, but also as someone who can help shape the vision of your overall career. It will also make the agent feel a shared responsibility for your new work, and thus he will work all the harder to sell it—after all, it may very well be his own suggestion that he is trying to sell.

### **What if Your Agent Quits?**

If your agent goes out of business, make sure he gives you something in writing releasing you from your obligation to him, so that you are free to find an agent elsewhere.

If your agent works for an agency and quits, and the agency wants to assign you another agent, you may not have a choice. If you signed an agency agreement that binds you to the agency as a whole, and the agreement did not have a key-man clause, then you will be legally bound to continue to work with that agency. Even in that case, though, you can always request that you be let out of the agreement. They may say no, but they may say yes, and it can't hurt to ask.

The real question is whether you want to stay with that agency or go elsewhere. My advice is to first give the agency a chance—after all, they have a (somewhat) vested interest in you already, and they at least have a general awareness of you. See if you like your new agent, if he is enthusiastic, and if he “gets” your work. If so, I would recommend staying put. If not, see if you can go elsewhere.

### **When to Let Him Go.**

Since this chapter up to this point was all about how to assure your agent wants to work with you, let’s stop a second and consider whether *you* want to work with *him*. It’s not always about what works for the agent—it’s also about what works for you.

Agents are lucky to have you, too. In fact, they need you: without authors, agents could not survive. And most agents always need to continue taking on new authors to survive. Indeed, there should be a book written for agents on how to keep their authors! This is especially the case if you become a successful author; the greater your success, the greater will be your ability to switch agents at your whim. This may seem like a fanciful dream right now, while you are still aspiring to even find an agent willing to read your work, but success can come very quickly—and if it does, you need to be prepared.

## **6 Reasons to Drop Your Agent.**

### **1. Scams.**

It should go without saying that you should drop your agent immediately if you sense he is involved in any sort of unethical behavior that might prey on authors (discussed at length in Chapter 9). If he tries to charge you fees, if he refers you to book doctors as a condition of representation—if he does anything which feels illegitimate—then run in the other direction.

### **2. His manner.**

If you come to dislike your agent's day-to-day manner—if he is rude, abrupt, insulting, or just very unpleasant to work with—then you'd be better off finding someone else. As I've said all throughout this book, the agent/author relationship is a long-term one, and it's not worth subjecting yourself to spending so much time with someone you don't want to interact with. I tend to find that when the energy is off, success rarely follows anyway.

### **3. He's unresponsive.**

Some agents stop replying immediately (or at all) to some clients in order to defend their time against those who call or email constantly. But other agents can become unresponsive when they have absolutely no justification

for it—some are on ego trips, some might represent other clients they deem more important, and some might simply operate that way with everyone. If you have a truly legitimate reason to contact your agent (not just to check up on your submission status after three days), and in general you are sparing with your contact with your agent, and if even in this scenario your agent is routinely taking weeks to return your calls or emails (or not returning them at all), then it's probably time to search elsewhere. Yes, people can get very busy in this industry, but you also have a right to be responded to in a normal period of time.

#### 4. He doesn't "get" your work.

Some agents are purely attorneys or businessmen, and reading and writing are not their primary passion. It is possible that on a visceral level you feel as if they don't really "get" your work, or understand what you are trying to do artistically. Other agents may be huge readers and writers themselves, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they will get your work, either. If they are doing a great job for you, then this shouldn't be an issue: it is, oddly enough, possible for agents to do a great job for you without ever truly understanding your work. But if they are not, and you feel they are steering you in a wrong direction as a result, then it may be time to reconsider. A personal connection

and vision has to be there on some level, or else the agent will never truly to be able to help you shape your career in the way you'd like it to go.

#### 5. You don't like his methodology.

You may get along well with your agent on a personal level, but might not like the way he's working on your behalf. For example, your agent might only be submitting your work to two publishers at a time, and waiting six months for a response. He might be keeping you in the dark about when he's sending it, or what he's doing for you in general. If it feels wrong to you, it probably is. If you don't like his methodology, then move on.

#### 6. He's ineffective.

Notice how I save this reason for last. This is because it is not easy landing an author a book deal—even for a great agent—and thus an agent's not landing you a deal should not necessarily be a reason to drop him. If you are happy with an agent's methodology—if he's sending out your work to 20 publishers at once, if he's very aggressive with follow up, if he keeps you in the loop, if you feel in your gut he's doing a great job for you—then that is all that matters. If the results are not positive, that is not his fault—that is just the result of the current editorial marketplace.

You should now have an excellent idea of what it's like to work with an agent, and several ways you can keep the relationship strong. One day you will need this information. But it's possible you may not be there yet, and if so, let's now turn to the final issue: what to do if you don't land one at all.

## Chapter 9:

### Now What?

It's entirely feasible that you will go through all of the steps in this book, do everything correctly, and still not land an agent. This may be due to the quality of your work—but it may not. If you are writing non-fiction, it may simply be due to the timing of the market, the poor sales in your genre, or the current competition. If you are writing fiction, the process is highly subjective. It could take 100 people walking through an art gallery in order for one person to really understand a work of art. Writing is not that different. It may simply take 50 people reading your work to find one who gets it. It may take 75, or it may take 100. Don't take it personally if you don't find that 1 in 100.

Yet if you've gone through all of these steps and still have not landed an agent, the question remains: what now?

#### To Self Publish?

If I had been writing this book 10 years ago, I would have advised you absolutely NOT self publish. Despite the rare success story, the vast majority of self-publishing adventures ten years ago were disasters for most authors: it

required a substantial financial risk, took a huge amount of time, and for most authors lead nowhere.

Now, as I write this in 2009, times have changed dramatically—the landscape has changed even in the last two years, and continues to change every day. Print on demand, e-books, youtube, blogs, social networking...we have entered a new world. New technology makes it easy and risk-free for authors to self publish in a print-on-demand or e-book format. Indeed, many authors are going this route.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of them are still finding that just because they “published” their book and perhaps even built a website for it, it doesn’t mean the masses have shown up to buy it, or that they’ve been able to draw review attention. I would guess that most self-published books sell but a few dozen copies to family and friends, and sadly, never lead to a book deal.

That said, given how easy it is, and that there is hardly any financial risk, I wouldn’t necessarily advise against it. If you are doing it merely for personal reasons, to share with family and friends, then do it. If you are doing it for commercial reasons—as a way to land a book deal with a major publisher—then I would say only do it if you realize in advance that 1) the chances of this happening are remote; and 2) you are going to have to put a huge amount of time and effort into bringing traffic, attention and publicity to your book online. If you have 100,000 followers of Twitter, or a video with 500,000

views on youtube, or an e-zine with 100,000 subscribers, then you may indeed be a good candidate for self-publishing. If you can manage to sell 5,000 or 10,000 copies on your own, if you can manage to land one or two major reviews in established venues, you may be able to defy the odds and land an agent. In the online world, it's all about what you bring to the table. Which is, in fact, good training for being published by a major publisher. The most successful traditionally published books also have in common authors who bring their own resources to the table, and who push their own books relentlessly over extended periods of time.

Other factors that affect a traditionally-published book's success will also affect the success of a self-published book: for example, does your book have a unique concept? Does it have competition? How does it stand amongst its competition? Is there a large market for the genre? Do you have the means and/or connections to reach out effectively to the market that needs to know about it? Are you promotable? Eloquent? How strong are your writing skills, and how well-written is your book? Is it the type of book that readers will feel compelled to recommend to friends? Ultimately, word of mouth is what sells book over time, and if your book is just not that good, then all the effort and publicity in the world can only make so much difference.

Which brings us back to the issue of improving your craft.

## **Continue to Improve Your Craft.**

In some cases, the reason you can't land an agent is because the particular agents out there subjectively do not like your book, and if you had been querying different people at a different time, you would have landed a deal and had a successful publication. There are certainly many stories of famous authors, like John Kennedy Toole, who could not land an agent but whose book nonetheless went on to one day find a publisher and win the Pulitzer Prize.

There are other cases, though, where, painful as it may be, you will have to ultimately admit to yourself that the reason you couldn't land an agent is because the writing itself is simply not strong enough, is not at the level it needs to be in order for you to be published by a major publisher on a national (and international) scope. Someone who has been playing the piano for a week, or a few months, or even a few years would never dream of approaching a major record label and insisting they hire him to record an album; yet every day the publishing industry is approached by authors who have just picked up the pen for the first time (creatively) and written their first novel, and who expect agents to represent them and publishers to publish them—and who are shocked and offended when they do not. They assume that, because they have a good concept for a novel and because they have

been writing in some form since the time they were taught to write, that means that, without any real attempt to hone their craft, they are nonetheless qualified to craft a novel. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case.

There are countless ways to improve your craft as a writer. One of the simplest and least expensive methods is to read one or more of the many books devoted to helping writers improve their craft. I spent many years writing three such books (*The First Five Pages*, *The Plot Thickens* and *A Dash of Style*), and there are many other excellent books out there as well, covering all aspects of the craft, from dialogue to characterization. There are also many fine websites devoted to helping writers improve their craft, and new ones pop up every day.

On the next level of expense and commitment, there are writers' workshops, writing groups, colonies, conferences and even MFA programs. Ultimately the best and most important thing you can do, though, is simply to keep writing (and reading). The more you write, simply by the act of writing, the better you will become. Devote more time to writing each day. And devote more time to self-editing: re-reading your work and editing yourself is just as important as writing new work. Try editing yourself after a day away from it, a week away, a month away, and a year away: each experience will be different, and each time you will learn something new. How hard you're willing to work, how much time you're willing to devote, how long you're

willing to stay with it until you get your break—this is what separates professional from amateur authors, and this is what will make the difference in your one day getting published.

Which brings us to our next topic: write another book.

### **Write Another Book.**

One of the best things you can do not only to improve your craft but also to take your mind off of the agent process is to immediately start writing another book. In fact, I would advise you starting to write a new book simultaneously with your querying process, even *before* you hear back from agents. It will take your mind off of waiting to hear from agents, and it will help you keep perspective that, regardless of what happens with the book you're submitting, you at least have another book in the works, have another shot if this one should not work out.

It could take six months or longer to finish the querying process, and if by then you end up with nothing but rejections, you will at least be able to take solace in the fact that you already have a new work far along. It will also get you that much closer to having another book with which to start the querying process over again. And it will keep you doing what you should be doing—writing.

I've met many authors who wait before hearing back from their querying process (sometimes two or three years) before they even consider writing another book. They figure that they must first find out whether or not the industry validates them before they can write again. This is the wrong way of thinking. First of all, unanimous rejections may not even be a reflection on the industry, but merely on those particular agents' tastes—and secondly, true authors write because they *have* to, because they *need* to. It is what they do, and it is who they are. If your deciding to write again is only contingent on whether the industry affirms you, then you are not writing for the right reasons. Painters paint, musicians play, and writers write. Period.

Even if you don't end up landing an agent the first or second or third time out, keep in mind that it wasn't all for naught: each time you query, you learn much more about the industry and about particular people in the industry, and you are building a valuable rolodex of information that can be built on. This will enable you to have that much of a more targeted submission the next time around. Additionally, along the way you may make personal connections, correspond with agents who like your work and who will remember you the next time you query. You also become a better writer with each book. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you are building a valuable backlist for yourself. The two, three or four books that you write that never land an agent initially may all just sit in a drawer for now, but one day, when you do land

that deal, and your published book is a success, your publisher may very well want to see what else you've done, and may end up publishing that entire backlist. I've seen this happen many times. The author who thought that he had wasted ten years writing four unpublished novels suddenly realizes he had never wasted a minute: he is just reaping all of the benefits belatedly.

### **Never Give Up.**

Finally, and most importantly, do not—*ever*—give up. This alone is what separates the professionals from the amateurs, the writers who get published from the writers who do not. It may take 5 years. It may take 10. It may even take 30. You need to dig in for a longer effort, to change your perception of the process from its being a one-time effort for one book to its being a multi-year effort for several books. If you keep writing, if you keep improving, if you hang in there long enough, you *will* get published.

It might help you if you keep in mind that if you do not land an agent, it is not a reflection on the entire industry—it is only the personal decisions of the 50 or 75 or 100 agents who happen to be the gatekeepers at any moment in time. These are just 50 or 100 human beings who have their own tastes and opinions and who may very well all be wrong.

Also keep in mind that the publishing industry is a transient and high burn-out one: many agents end up either quitting or moving elsewhere every

few years. This means that if you have a new novel two years later, it may be that when you approach the industry again, many of those 50 or 100 agents may have been replaced with new people with entirely different sets of opinions. New agencies also form all the time. Additionally, people's tastes and needs change week to week in this industry. It is possible that an agent who doesn't think your novel will sell may change his mind five or ten years later and want to take it on. A rejected manuscript really does have nine lives.

Finally, keep in mind that landing an agent is not always the be-all and the end-all. Many excellent agents represent excellent books, do a great job for them, and are still unable to land a deal. Again, keep in mind that this is not a reflection on your work, but merely the result of the personal opinions of the 30 or so acquiring editors who happen to be the gatekeepers at that moment in time. A big part of your success as a writer will depend on whether you are able to not take rejection personally, at all stages of the process. This even holds true for published authors, for those lucky enough to land the great deal. I've seen so many authors land great deals, get great reviews, sell few copies, and then be unable to get published again. Many times, even landing the agent, landing the publisher and landing the reviews does not guarantee you success. This is why I say that you must persevere at *all* stages of the process, that you must not take it personally, and that you must continue writing for the love of it.

Stephen King's first four novels were rejected; Robert Penn Warren's first two novels were rejected. Tom Clancy was only able to find a small publisher for his first book, and the advance was also small. John Grisham was only able to find a small publisher for his first book, and it didn't even earn back its \$15,000 advance.

Yet none of these authors gave up, and the world is a better place for it. If they can hang in there, so can you.

To ask Mr. Lukeman questions about writing and publishing, please visit his blog:

[www.askaliteraryagent.com](http://www.askaliteraryagent.com)

# How to Write a Great Query Letter:

Insider Tips and Secrets for Success

by

Noah Lukeman

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## Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: Preparation

Chapter 2: Formatting

    The 4 Formatting Red Flags

Chapter 3: The 3 Paragraph Rule

Chapter 4: Your First Paragraph: The Introduction

Chapter 5: Your Second Paragraph: The Plot

    3 Common Mistakes to Avoid in Your Plot Paragraph

    Exercise: Creating a Logline

    4 Positive Traits to Have in Your Plot Paragraph

    Exercise: Refining Your Plot Synopsis

Chapter 6: Your Third Paragraph: Your Bio

    4 Common Mistakes to Avoid in Your Author Bio

    8 Positive Elements to Include in Your Author Bio

Chapter 7: Fiction versus Non-Fiction (How a Query Letter Will Differ)

    7 Elements to Include When Summarizing Non-Fiction

    2 Crucial Elements of a Non-Fiction Bio

    Different Types of Non-Fiction

Chapter 8: Final Issues to Keep in Mind

    7 Common Mistakes

Conclusion

Checklist: 30 Mistakes to Avoid in Your Query Letter

About the Author

## Introduction

“It is more difficult to get a qualified literary agent than it is to get a publishing contract.”

--John Boswell

Most writers put a tremendous amount of effort into their content, spending months or years with their manuscripts, agonizing over word choice, scene order, character development. Yet when it comes time to write a query letter, they will often write something off the top of their head, sometimes with a mere hour’s effort, and let this suffice to represent their work. They rush through the letter process so that the agent can get to the book itself, which they feel will explain everything. They feel that if an agent just sees the writing, nothing else will matter, and that a poor query letter will even be forgiven.

This is faulty thinking. For agents, the query letter is all. If it’s not exceptional, agents will not even request to see the writing, and writers will never even get a chance to showcase their talent. For most writers, the query letter—which they rushed through—becomes the only piece of writing they will ever be judged by, and unfortunately, the only chance they ever had.

Many writers feel upset that their work is evaluated and judged by a one page letter—much less a letter that doesn’t even include a sample of the writing. This is understandable. But this is also the nature of the industry, and something we all have to deal with. It is not unlike an actor’s being judged by a mere headshot. It won’t change. The solution isn’t to rail against the industry, but rather to become expert at writing the query—indeed, to make the query an art form in and of itself.

While it may seem as if a query letter is a shallow way to judge an author, I can tell you from an agent’s perspective that it is a very effective tool. For the professional eye, a query letter is much more than just a letter: it shows the agent whether you are able to exhibit word economy, whether you have a grasp on the nature of your own work, and whether you have a realistic grasp on your own background and credentials. If you’re writing non-fiction, it also demonstrates whether you have a grasp on your market, your competition. A query letter can also serve to warn an agent, to act as a red flag, if for example you are too aggressive, or pitch too many projects at once. The way it physically looks speaks volumes, as does whether you’ve sent it to the right person in the right way. A layman looks at a query and sees a one page letter. An agent looks at it and scans it for 100 different criteria. If you know what to look for, this mere page can tell you more

about the writer and his work than you can possibly imagine. I will share these secrets with you here, and teach you the perspective and criteria of a publishing professional.

It is not the writer's fault that he does not naturally know how to craft a great query letter. Writing is an artistic endeavor, while a query letter is a marketing endeavor. Artistic and marketing sensibilities rarely co-exist. Many great artists have trouble crafting a good query, while many great marketers can't deliver on their art form. It is the fortunate writer who is born with the talent for both—but for those who are not, marketing is a learned skill. It takes time, patience and humility. I've encountered many writers who frown on the art of marketing, who consider themselves too much of an artist to deign to write a logline or synopsis.

But a good writer should be humble, and willing to learn from any form of writing. If you are willing to listen, there is much that the query letter can teach you about the craft of writing: the art of crafting a query letter makes a writer re-evaluate his own work and might even lead to his revising it. In this way we come to see that writing a great query letter is in fact more than a mere marketing exercise: it is a medium through which to re-evaluate and perhaps even alter your work. At the very least, it will offer you insights into your work which you may not have had previously.

The query letter is indeed an art form. Books have been devoted to it, and if you go out and read 10 different books on how to write a query, you might walk away with 10 different approaches, even conflicting advice. None of this makes the query letter easier to grasp; it is by no means a science, and you will never find a consensus on how to craft one. Most writers never had a class in writing a query letter, were never given an expert's perspective, so they are left to their own devices, and must struggle to become a marketer. Authors are not to blame for being ignorant of how to craft a query letter—but they are to blame if they don't take seriously the need to rectify this ignorance, and devote time to learning the query's special art form.

The more practical, hands-on experience someone has with queries, the more you might trust his judgment—particularly if this person is an active publishing professional who evaluates query letters for a living. As a literary agent for the last 13 years, I have received thousands of queries a year—every year. That doesn't make me the final authority on query letters—but it does mean I've had extensive experience, and can offer you a big-picture perspective.

While the numbers against you are staggering, the road is not as bleak as it may seem. If you learn what to do, learn how to avoid the pitfalls

that signal an amateur, you can indeed write a great query letter. And with a great query letter, you will be a lot closer than you can imagine to landing an agent, and eventually getting published. While agents tend to be harsh critics and somewhat jaded, they all also secretly hope to discover the next Clancy or Grisham or Faulkner or Hemingway. It's why they entered the business—the thrill of discovery, or of a financial windfall, or of simply being able to help another human being achieve his dreams. Along the way, agents become besieged with queries and they can become jaded, overwhelmed with work, and read queries with an eye to reject. But no matter how jaded they become, they also, deep down, never let go of the desire to discover the next great author. Some flame exists somewhere inside them waiting to react. It is up to you to spark it.

Great query letters do exist. A great query letter makes an agent sit up and want to read more. It stands out from the fold and shakes an agent from his stupor, regardless of how many queries he's read that day. It makes him excited, makes him want to reach for the phone and call the author immediately, regardless of what time of night it is. It reminds him why he's in the business. There have been many times in my career when I've sat down late at night, poring through hundreds of queries, exhausted, and not expecting to find anything. Yet there it was. A great query letter. A

letter that, despite all odds, filled me with energy late at night, sparked in me a feeling of excitement, that made me want to call the author right then. Sometimes these letters offered no publishing credentials whatsoever, had only the barest idea of a plot, had hardly any evidence of the writing. Yet still they worked. Why? I've given this a great deal of thought, and have analyzed the elements that comprise a great query letter. These are the elements I will share with you here.

# Chapter 1:

## Preparation

Robert Penn Warren's first three novels were unanimously rejected by publishers.

A great query letter is useless in the wrong hands. Not only is the literary agency that you choose important, but of equal importance is the particular agent you choose within that agency. “To Whom it May Concern” and “Dear Agent” cannot exist in a good query letter. Queries must be addressed to specific (appropriate) agents at specific (appropriate) agencies. There are thousands of literary agents out there, and targeting the perfect one will mean the difference in your getting published.

Equally important is your taking the time to research other books similar (or competitive) to yours. If you write non-fiction, it is crucial to know the market and competition; and whether your work is fiction or non-fiction, knowing similar books will help lead you to the appropriate agent, and will be crucial in crafting a truly effective query letter. You will need to know the similar books your potential agents represent, and will need to

know the books in your genre which were successful, so that you can reference them in your letter.

So before you craft your query letter, first make sure you do the requisite research, so that your query letter will not open with “To Whom It May Concern.” How to do this research is an art form in and of itself, and is beyond the scope of this book (I cover this topic in depth in my book, *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com))). For our purposes, I will assume you’ve already done it. If you haven’t done it, do so now.

I will also assume you are targeting agents, not editors. The principles of a good query letter also work when querying an editor, so it is not a lost effort. But in nearly every case it is much more beneficial to target an agent first. (Again, why that is the case is beyond the scope of this book.) Thus in the following pages we will assume you are querying agents, and you will find repeated references to the agent.

Finally, I’d like you to take a step back and ask yourself what the goal is of your query. Many writers hope to, in this one page letter, convey all the nuances of their plot, their characters, to convey everything about who they are, and to, by its end, have an agent commit to represent them. Herein lies the problem. Most writers expect too much of a query letter, and

thus approach it with the wrong mentality. This mentality trickles down to the content, and even the writing style itself.

The goal of a query letter is, simply, to get an agent to want to read more. That's all. Realizing this will alone be of tremendous help. It will take the pressure off you to achieve everything, and thus give your letter a more calm, clear and focused tone. It will prevent you from slipping into a desperate style, from using too-strong sales tactics. And since this is a much less ambitious goal—one which even seems achievable—it will give you a boost of confidence. It also gives you a definition of “success,” so you can know if you've indeed crafted a “successful” query letter.

Now that you've done your research, targeted agents, and defined your goal for “success,” let's get down to the business of crafting a great query letter.

## Chapter 2:

### Formatting

“Be persistent. Editors change; editorial tastes change; markets change. Too many beginning writers give up too easily.”

--John Jakes

With a perpetual mound of query letters in front of him, the jaded publishing professional often just wants to get through the pile, and might find himself actively looking for reasons to reject. If so, he will be searching for any red flags that signal an amateur. If certain flags are present, the professional may not even have to read the content of the letter—thus many queries are rejected without even being read. No red flag is as giant as improper formatting.

Formatting errors can alone get you rejected. They are extremely petty—but also extremely visual. If a letter is filled with bold and underlining, if it is written on pink paper, in a cursive script, in a huge font, this will strike the agent first, before he even reads a word. He will already be biased against you, and his decision will be that much easier.

Let's look, one by one, at different formatting issues that can signal an amateur:

## **The 4 Formatting Red Flags**

### **1. Paper**

We begin with the paper itself. It seems innocent, yet there are many issues an agent might consider when it comes to the paper.

Color. On the most obvious level, if the paper is an odd color, such as hot pink or lime green, it is a red flag. The paper should be a basic white, or off white.

Size. If the paper is off-sized, for example legal sized, or A4, or if the query is written on a notepad or a Post-It (yes, I have received a query on a Post-It), then something is awry. The paper size should only be 8½ x 11.

Texture. If the paper is too thin, such as onion paper, or some other strange texture, it will signal an amateur. (I have received queries on lined notebook paper, torn out of a spiral ringed notebook.) It is acceptable to send in a query on plain, white copying paper, although it might look cheap. I would advise investing in good quality paper.

At the risk of stating the obvious, make sure the paper is not stained, torn or in any way defaced, and that it is not double-sided. (I have received letters like this.) I once received a query letter written on a piece of oak tag, about two feet by four feet. I appreciated the fact that I didn't have to strain my eyes, but otherwise, it didn't convince me. Large stories don't need large paper.

### **Letterhead**

Many writers waste precious space in the body of their query letter with their contact information. They include sentences like, "If you wish to contact me, you can call me at 222-2222, or email me at [me@me.com](mailto:me@me.com), or write to me at Name, 10 Main Street, Here, NY, 11111." Contact information should never be put in the body of a letter. Instead, invest in good, personalized stationery, with your contact information neatly tucked away in the header or footer.

### **2. Ink**

Believe it or not, something as subtle as ink can signal an amateur. To begin with, do not use colored ink. I promise you that red or green ink won't make an agent more inclined to represent you.

If your cartridge is dying, don't mail off a letter which is half-readable and half fading away. Buy a new cartridge and print it again.

If you use an old, dot-matrix printer which makes the type hard to read, it is a red flag. More often than not, so is a query letter written on a typewriter. There are some old-school writers who prefer to use a typewriter, so there are exceptions, but in most cases it signals something awry.

If your letter is handwritten, it definitely signals something is off. This should go without saying, but you'd be surprised how many handwritten letters I continue to receive. Sometimes they come from children, who at a young age are hoping to break into print, but most often they come from prisoners.

For a period of about two years I received handwritten letters from a writer determined to gain my representation. He sent them about once a month, each from a different country. His book was a travelogue, and I suppose he wanted to prove how well-traveled he was. I thought this was odd—that is, until I started receiving weekly postcards from another man who claimed to be captain of a ship, filled with 100 adoring women, who he claimed were rowing his vessel across the Atlantic. Oddly enough, his

postcards never even said what his book was about. Eventually they stopped.

Getting back to the normal world, I would also advise not using a cheap inkjet printer. Inkjets have evolved phenomenally over the last few years, so new ones (even cheap ones) tend to deliver a quality that can rival a laser printer. But older inkjets tend to offer a quality which looks visibly cheaper than a laser printer. It is acceptable, but at the same time it does not put your best foot forward. I hate advising writers to spend money, but I would advise your investing in either a laser printer or a high quality inkjet. The difference seems subtle, but to the trained eye, it is apparent. A laser printer more likely indicates a professional.

### **3. Fonts**

Fonts can also signal an amateur. Your font should be a standard, simple font, such as Times or Garamond. Some writers use a strange or quirky font, presumably to stand out. This only stigmatizes you. Some fonts, like courier (*example*), simply look cheap, while others, like calligraphy (*example*), resemble a wedding invitation. Either way, don't switch fonts mid-letter, for example, to quote your own writing, or for emphasis. Choose one font and stick to it.

An odd-sized font also signals something awry. Your font should be standard 12-point. If too large, it will look childish; if too small, it will make it harder for the agent to read. Agents read for a living, and the last thing you want to do is make your letter harder on the eyes. They will put off reading it. Since the 12-point font size can differ for each computer, if you're unsure of the standard size, always err on the side of making your font too large.

Writers tend to be anxious to get their point across in a query, and might try to emphasize text by any means possible. I often receive letters overflowing with bold, underlined and italicized writing. It can be spotted instantly, before an agent even reads a word. It gives off an air of desperation, of a cheap sales letter. If you must emphasize text, do it sparingly, and only use italics. Never use bold or underlining, as this signals an amateur.

#### **4. Spacing**

The professional query letter is pleasing on the eye. With a cursory glance one can spot ample margins in every direction, properly indented paragraphs, and proper spacing in general. Subconsciously, this makes a difference. If something is off, it can signal an amateur.

Your margins should be at least one inch in every direction. I've received numerous letters with tiny margins, allowing the text to stretch all the way across the page in an effort to get more material in. This only makes it harder for the agent to read.

Justified margins are harder on the agent's eye, and are not standard.

All paragraphs should be indented.

The letter, in general, should be single-spaced, with no line breaks between paragraphs. I've seen letters double or even triple-spaced, with additional line spaces between the paragraphs. This is substandard, and will signal an amateur.

### **Why CAPS Matter**

While we are taught book titles should be italicized, there is a convention in the publishing industry that book titles are set in ALL CAPS. This alone can signal a pro. Someone who really knows the industry will put his book title in ALL CAPS. The titles of other books, though, while they can go either way, are usually put in italics, as are the titles of literary magazines and other publications.

## Chapter 3:

### The 3 Paragraph Rule

“After sixteen rejections, Irving Stone’s *Lust for Life* was finally accepted and published in 1934. It has now sold about twenty five million copies.”

--Andre Bernard, Bill Henderson, *Rotten Rejections*

The best secret I can teach you about writing a great query letter is that less is more. Writers feel the need to cram their letters with information, to widen the margins, lengthen the page, even take several pages. They go on about their plot, their biography, they become personal, start up a one way conversation. It is a huge mistake. Mark Twain said, “I don’t have time to write you a short letter, so I’m writing you a long one instead.” How true this is. Anyone can write an effective long letter. Few people can write an effective short one.

Nothing in a query letter should be wasted. As with a resume, every word choice must be deliberate. I’m always impressed when I receive a query which takes up only half a page or less (which is rare). I understand how hard it is for a writer to achieve this, to fight back the urge to tell more,

to condense all he has to say to a mere few sentences. More often than not, I'll be intrigued. If he can exhibit this kind of discipline in a query letter, it bodes well for what he can to do in the actual book.

But most query letters don't do this. So the first thing you must do is rein in your query. Under no circumstance should a query letter exceed one page. *Ever*. If so, it is a clear red flag, a sign of an amateur. It is just a convention, but it happens to be a good one—not just because it is convenient for the agent, but because it is a fine test of a writer's skill. Good writing is entirely about economy; good writers don't use three words when they can use one. Word economy not only indicates that words aren't wasted, but more importantly that all word choice is deliberate. When deliberate, word choice is more thought-out; when such effort of thought is put into each individual word, an equal amount of effort will often be applied to the whole. Plot choices will be more thought out; character choices will be, as will choices of setting, direction, pacing, progression, journey and all the other elements that go into a great book.

The word-economy litmus test for a writer is the query letter. Can he say what he needs to in merely one page? Can he condense a 300 page story to three lines? Can he do all of this and still convey his plot, his background, convey why his story is unique and worthy? To do so, he will

have to make some amazing word choices, exhibit amazing economy. If he is an inherently economical writer, he will know how to do this. If not, it will show. It is not easy. We in the publishing industry know this.

Yet this is your job. I've received many queries that went on for two or even three pages, the writer claiming he had so much to say that he needed more room. But this is a poor excuse. If a writer can't achieve what he needs to in one page, his writing ability is simply not developed enough. It is nearly certain that his manuscript, too, will be longer than it needs to be. Writing is about discipline, and the first place to exhibit this is in the query letter.

Part of the reason why writers allow their query letters to sprawl is because they don't realize that a query letter must have structure. Without structure, there is license to have an infinite number of paragraphs on any number of topics; without structure, there is no plan on how to begin, how to progress, and how to end. Without an overall game plan, anything can happen, and if you leave that window open, anything *will* happen. Like an architect, you need a blueprint, exact specifications on how you'll proceed. And the best way to do this is to follow what I call the Three Paragraph Rule.

If you look at most query letters, the first thing you'll notice is a haphazard number of paragraphs. It is quite common to see a plot described over the course of two or even three paragraphs, to see biographies stretching over multiple paragraphs, to have filler in between which is neither pitch nor explanation. Successful query letters should consist of three paragraphs. No more, no less. This principle alone will save you. It will prevent you from adding that fourth paragraph, from adding filler or random sentences. It will give you a structure, game plan and direction.

Of course it is still possible to ruin the content within these paragraphs, to go on too long within this structure. Indeed, each paragraph is an art form in and of itself—it must be, if it is to convey what it needs to in such a finite amount of space. So let's look at each on its own terms and examine its unique demands.

## Chapter 4: Your First Paragraph: The Introduction

“I finished my first book seventy-six years ago. I offered it to every publisher on the English-speaking earth I had ever heard of. Their refusals were unanimous: and it did not get into print until, fifty years later, publishers would publish anything that had my name on it...”

--George Bernard Shaw

The first paragraph should consist of a one sentence introduction.

This is your chance (perhaps your only chance) to grab the agent, since many agents will be immediately biased—for good or for bad—with a sentence or two. Contrary to popular belief, this doesn’t mean throwing out a hokey line, or a hard sell, or a gimmicky sentence, like “Don’t throw out this letter!” It means *truly* hooking the agent, making him want to pay attention. And the way to do this is to immediately demonstrate that you’re not contacting him haphazardly.

If a writer queries via a referral, he will always begin with, “I am writing to you because your client, John Smith, recommended that I do so.” Thus an agent, whether he likes it or not, must take the first sentence of any given letter very seriously, if for no other reason than he risks offending an

existing client (or editor, or other business contact) that may have sent him a referral. Thus, you have a great opportunity.

Chances are you won't have a referral, as many writers are not lucky enough to have friends who have great agents and are willing to recommend them. But you can still make up for it. The way to do so is to write something along the lines of, "I am writing to you because you represented TITLE by AUTHOR, and I feel my book is similar." The way to grab the agent is to make it personal, to make it about *him* instead of about you. Referencing one of his titles will help accomplish this.

More importantly, a personal reference will signal to the agent that yours is not a random query letter. It will show that you're approaching him for a specific reason, that you've put a great deal of time and energy into researching the market; it will show that you know who he represents, and the types of books he's sold. It will put a positive association into his mind, as it will make him think of a book he sold. It will offer a comparison, allowing him to immediately grasp the type of book you're writing and thus help him decide if he wants to represent another like it. It will show that you know the market, that you have an objective grasp of what your own book is about and where it fits within that market. It will indicate that you've put care into your writing, since writers who put so much energy

into the right approach generally put an equal amount of care into their writing. You will start the agent off on a positive foot, and make him more inclined to like the rest of your letter. And since this first paragraph will only be one sentence, it will be amply spaced, and thus more likely that an agent will actually read and finish it (as opposed to an opening sentence which heralds a 10 sentence paragraph). In this one sentence, this one paragraph, you will have accomplished 10 different objectives.

All of this assumes, of course, that you've already done the weeks or months of requisite research in order to know precisely which agents represent titles appropriately similar to yours. (How to go about doing this research is beyond the scope of this book, but I discuss it at length in my book, *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent*

[\(www.landaliteraryagent.com\)](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com) If you bluff, if you don't truly do the research, it will show. I've received many letters which referenced a book I sold, but when I read the rest of the query, I realized that their book was not at all similar; it was just a gimmick to get me to pay attention. When an agent realizes this, he will just be annoyed. So when referencing a book, make sure it is truly appropriate.

But if you've done the research and query a truly appropriate agent and reference a truly appropriate title, then you are already off to a shining

head start. Imagine the advantage you now have over a writer who mails off a letter to a random agent at a random agency and merely begins it with “To Whom it May Concern.” Half your battle is already won.

## Chapter 5: Your Second Paragraph: The Plot

“Lee Pennington has been published in more than 300 magazines—and rejected so many thousand times that in one six-month period he papered all four walls of a room with rejection slips.”

--Andre Bernard, Bill Henderson, *Rotten Rejections*

The second paragraph of your query letter should offer a short description of the plot, and nothing else. I emphasize *short* because one of the biggest mistakes writers make in their queries is allocating too much space to plot summary. Writers don't realize that many agents will make an immediate decision based merely on the genre and the author's credentials. If it is a genre they are actively looking to represent and the author's credentials are great, then they will pay close attention to the plot synopsis. But if it is a genre of fiction (or non-fiction) that they have not had success with in the past, or are not keen on representing, and/or if the author's credentials are not impressive enough, then the details of the plot will make little (if any) difference. In either case, offering a long plot description is a mistake, since at this early stage, agents only want to consider your query in the broadest possible sense.

As a rule of thumb, limit your plot synopsis to three sentences. It is hard to condense a book to a single paragraph, and even harder to condense this paragraph to a mere few sentences. But it has to be done. Such economy is the mark of good writing, and the overall length of the query letter must be kept in mind.

### **Exercise: Create a Logline**

The process of condensing your plot description is similar to what you do when you reduce your plot to a logline. A “logline” is generally considered to be a one sentence plot summary. In fact, condensing your plot to a single sentence is a good exercise: if you can get your plot down to one sentence, imagine what you can do with three. A three sentence plot description will suddenly seem generous. By doing it this way—shrinking more than necessary, then expanding—you get to strip your plot down to its bare bones, then build it back up, and get to see what is truly essential.

### **3 Common Mistakes to Avoid in your Plot Paragraph**

#### *1. Don't exceed one paragraph*

As explained above, you cannot exceed three sentences, and it should also go without saying that these three sentences should belong to one paragraph. Do not use two or more paragraphs to convey your plot. This sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many queries I receive which use two, three or even four paragraphs to summarize the plot. Remember, there will always be time for an extended synopsis (for example, a one page synopsis) at a later stage, which you can send if requested. Now is not that time.

## *2. Don't name names*

When reading a new book, it takes effort for a reader to stop and learn new characters' names. The same holds true with reading a query letter—it expends unnecessary effort on the agent's behalf to stop and absorb a character's name. And almost always it is unnecessary. At this early stage, an agent doesn't need to know your protagonist's name; all he needs to know is "the protagonist" or "the antagonist" or "the main character" or "the narrator." You never want him to have to slow down or expend any unnecessary energy, and you don't want to include anything not absolutely necessary. Any well-written logline or plot synopsis should be able to exist just fine without a character's name—in fact, if it needs a name in order to work, then it is a sign something is awry.

### *3. Don't mention subplots*

An agent does not need to know subplots at this early stage.

Remember, he will likely make a decision based just on the genre, and if he reads so far as to decide based on the plot, he will only want to know the general concept. He certainly will not need to know subplots. Summarizing your plot in a few sentences is enough of a task—don't try to cram in subplots. Indeed, sometimes writers use subplots as an escape for focusing on the main plot, because the work is lacking a strong plot to begin with.

## **4 Positive Traits to Have in Your Plot Paragraph**

### *1. Specifics*

Strong writing is specific. Instead of writing “There was a string of murders in a small town” you might write “Four people were hacked to death in Wichita, Kansas over a two week period.” Instead of “My novel tells the story of a natural disaster that occurred in the middle of the century,” you might say, “My novel tells the story of the Great Earthquake of 1948 which killed 221 people.” Specific writing not only indicates a strong writer, it also helps the agent immediately get a fix on the plot.

Indeed, sometimes authors write in generalities to avoid getting down to specifics, as there isn't much to say. If you have the facts, use them.

## *2. Time period*

You'll notice in the corrected examples above specific time periods.

This is not by accident. Specific writing means a specific period of time.

Indeed, time is a tremendous tool, one of the strongest elements you can incorporate in your plot paragraph, as it conveys so much with a single word. 1776. 1812. 1945. These few numbers evoke an entire feeling.

Similarly, time frame is extraordinarily effective. "My novel takes place over three weeks." Two days. A weekend. 24 hours. 10 years. With only a few words, each of these brings so much to mind. It gives an agent an immediate grasp on the structure of your work; it also shows him that your book does indeed have a structure, and that you, the writer, have enough objectivity to be aware of it. Compare:

"My novel takes place over a short period of time."

Or:

"My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842."

A huge difference. The first example tells us nothing: it could be a novel about anything. In the second, though, a tremendous amount is

accomplished. In a mere sentence, without a word about the plot, we can almost picture the book. Only one thing is missing.

### *3. Location*

And that is location. “My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842” gives you an idea, but “My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842 in Biloxi, Mississippi” completes the picture. Fargo, North Dakota. Brooklyn, New York. Los Angeles. Rome. Reykjavik. Location says so much, evokes an atmosphere, a climate, a people, a language, a culture. A novel set in New Orleans will offer a different sensibility than one set in Northern Maine.

Location, like time, is an effective tool in creating a logline, since it conveys so much in so little space. It also, by its nature, demands specificity, another trait of good writing. Location, like time, demands a writer to wrack his brain and ask himself what, precisely, is the main location of his work. Some locations are so big, or so overused (like New York City), that naming them doesn’t really evoke much that is unusual—indeed, doesn’t even bring to mind a specific location, since anyone who lives in New York City knows that the Lower East Side is a completely different city than the Upper West Side. Thus, if you find yourself stuck with a rather generic location, try to make it more specific. For example,

instead of New York City, you might say Harlem; instead of Los Angeles, you might say West Hollywood. Specificity also helps establish authenticity, especially if your work is set in a place that few people would know about unless they had been there or had researched it heavily.

McMurdo Station, Antarctica. Poznan, Poland. If the writer chooses such a setting, there is a greater likelihood he knows what he's writing about.

Consider also that an unusual climate can sometimes substitute for (and/or complement) a location. For example, "My novel takes place during an unusual warm spell in New York in February, over a three day period of 70 degrees." Or during a cold spell in Los Angeles, or a drought in Texas, or heavy rains in Tennessee, or heavy snow in Marquette, Michigan, or the burning heat of the Arizona desert.

#### **4. Comparison**

Comparing your book to another book (or film) can say it all—and most importantly, do so in just a few words. For example, you could say:

"My book tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who returns from the war and feels alienated. He gets into trouble with the law when antagonized without reason. He must fight for his survival, and fight the injustice of his own government and people."

Or:

“My book is in the vein of *First Blood*.”

You see how much space you can save, while also painting a more accurate and precise picture.

Comparing your book to another work accomplishes four tasks: 1) it helps an agent get a fix on the plot immediately; 2) it helps the agent identify the genre immediately; 3) it demonstrates that you know your genre, and know which other books were successful (and that you know what the competition is); and 4) it compares your work to a successful work, thus implanting a positive association.

For some writers, especially high concept writers, finding a comparison will be easy; but others, especially more literary authors, might find themselves stumped. It can force them to ask themselves hard questions, like what genre am I really writing in? What books are truly good comparisons? How exactly is my book different? What is my style? Perhaps your book is a crossover of genres, like a detective story with a supernatural element. In such a case, you might resort to the Hollywood technique of saying something like, “*The Haunting* meets *L.A. Confidential* in my novel.” If you go this route, though, just don’t take it too far. “My book is a combination of *The Mosquito Coast*, *The Addams Family* and *The*

*Waltons*, with a touch of *Crossing Over* with John Edwards thrown in.”

This will only confuse an agent.

Another effective technique is comparing your main character to another memorable character from literature. “My character is Rambo-esque,” or “My novel features an Iago-esque character,” or “he is the next Hannibal Lecter” says it all.

If you can’t think of any books or characters that offer a strong comparison, then at least name the genre itself, and make an effort to at least name your style of writing. For example, you might not be able to summarize your novel but you might be able to say that you’re writing in the tradition of Flannery O’Connor. Be humble and careful when doing this, though, since you don’t want to come off as being megalomaniacal. I’ve seen too many query letters that began, “I am the next Grisham,” or “Stephen King holds nothing next to me,” or “Shakespeare would have been proud.”

If despite your best efforts you can’t identify any books remotely similar to yours, or any writers that are in your tradition, or even identify the genre itself, then this is a red flag. You may lack objectivity, self-awareness of your own work and style. This can carry through to the writing itself. Many beginning writers might be proud of this, might

consider it a stamp of originality. But more often than not this simply indicates someone striving to be original for originality's sake. In such a case, effort is diverted away from developing the characters and plot, and instead directed towards originality. It always shows in the writing. Such writers need to learn that having traditional confines can, paradoxically, allow the most room for originality.

### **Exercise: Refining Your Plot Synopsis**

- Take your plot synopsis and share it with five trusted readers. Ask each if they immediately get what the book is about. Ask each for their understanding of what type of book it is, of what genre they think it falls under, of what they think happens. Ask them if they'd be intrigued to read more. Ask them why or why not. Are there any common reactions? Can you make any adjustments based on this?
- Read your plot synopsis aloud. How does it sound when you vocalize it? If you had been given 15 seconds with a top executive and pitched that synopsis aloud, do you think they would have given you a deal based on that? Why or why not? Does it feel different spoken than it does on the page? Can you make any adjustments as a result?

- Pretend a stranger has just asked you the question that all writers dread: “What is your book about?” Can you answer that question quickly and definitively, in 10 seconds or less? If not, why not? The answer to this will be the key to your finding the right synopsis for your plot.

- Looking at your plot synopsis on paper, does it capture the essence of your story? Does it feel specific? Unique? If not, is there anything you can do to enhance it?

## Chapter 6: Your Third Paragraph: Your Bio

“It seems important to me that beginning writers ponder this—that since 1964, I have never had a book, story, or poem rejected that was not later published. If you know what you are doing, eventually you will run into an editor who knows what he/she is doing. It may take years, but never give up.”

--Joseph Hansen

Your third and final paragraph should be your author biography.

This is the paragraph that causes some writers trepidation—and for good reason. Most query letters are made or broken by the author’s bio, and many agents’ decisions are primarily based on this. Indeed, some agents will scan over the letter and go directly to the bio, deciding whether to even go back and consider the rest of the letter based on this. If they don’t like what they find, your plot synopsis might not even be read.

If your bio shows that you have published in *The New Yorker*, or had a book published with Knopf, nearly every agent will want to read your manuscript, even if they are not enthralled by your plot synopsis. Such is the power of the bio—and of course, of your credentials. If you do not have these things (which most writers don’t), then there is a battle ahead of you,

and you will need to compensate as best you can. That is what we'll focus on here.

Like a good plot paragraph, a good bio paragraph is short. It gets to the point, says only what it needs to, and concludes. Unlike a plot paragraph, though, a good bio paragraph doesn't *always* need to be short: if you genuinely have enough major credits to support a lengthy bio paragraph, then go for it—in fact, in such a case, a long bio would be a plus. It is rare, though, to encounter the writer who genuinely has so many major publications, credits and awards that he needs several sentences to encapsulate it all. Most of the time bio paragraphs are unnecessarily long—and this, like an unnecessarily long plot paragraph, is a red flag. It is, once again, a sign of wasteful writing. Economy is key, and one must constantly keep in mind the overall length of the query.

As an agent, it is better to encounter a writer who has no credits, and who is aware of this fact and keeps his bio short, than a writer who has no credits but wastes several sentences or more trying to make up for it with an inflated, irrelevant bio. Not only is he wasting words (which a writer should never do) but it signals he might also be out of touch, might consider all of the irrelevant information to be genuine assets. When you encounter the writer who states, "I drive a tractor all day long, so I have plenty of

experience being outdoors, and have the best perspective to write a man-against-nature thriller,” it makes you pause. Indeed, writers are usually their own worst enemies in their bios, listing information which not only doesn’t help them, but actually hurts.

Let’s begin by looking at what you should *not* do in your bio.

#### *4 Common Mistakes to Avoid in Your Author Bio*

##### **1. Don’t list minor credits**

Over the years I have been asked countless times whether one should include minor credits in one’s author bio. This question seems to be a matter of great debate among writers. It shouldn’t be, because the answer is simple: No. Listing minor or amateur publication credits—such as publications in local magazines or newspapers—will not make an agent more likely to take you on. All it will do is associate you with the amateur publication, and make the agent think of you in an amateur way. This also holds true for the mention of minor awards and of endorsements from minor or unknown authors.

The impulse to mention minor credits is understandable: it is intimidating to face an author biography having nothing of substance to say. Nonetheless, you must fight your impulse; if you have nothing

impressive to say, don't say anything. Remember that agents do not impress easily anyway.

If you are a more experienced author, when your publication credits start to accumulate do not forget to shed the mention of old credits as you garner new, more impressive ones. It's like shedding old, more minor information off of your resume. No matter how hard gained those minor credits were, allow them to subside. The higher caliber credits you have, the better it will represent you. More is not better. Better to have only three major magazine credits than to have 3 major credits and 20 minor ones.

## **2. Don't include irrelevant information**

Many writers understand the importance of economy when it comes to the plot synopsis, yet when it comes to the author biography paragraph, many writers tend to lose their discipline. Maybe it's because they're nervous, or maybe because they feel insecure, or don't feel they have much impressive to say—whatever the reason, they tend to sprawl. They'll talk about a writing class they had in fourth grade, mention how everyone in their office thinks they are a good writer.

Don't allow any information in your author biography paragraph which is not absolutely relevant. Since it might be hard to gain objectivity

on such an issue, show it to a few critical readers. Ask them if anything feels extraneous; sometimes you'll be surprised to find that different readers will find information extraneous which you considered important.

### **3. Don't be overly personal**

This demands its own rule, since many writers tend to get (unnecessarily) personal in their author biographies. They might throw in information about their children, their uncles, their grandmother's history; they might talk about their favorite hobbies, how they spend their time, why they decided to retire and write a book. Many beginning writers feel the need to justify why they are writing in the first place, and thus an agent will encounter bios explaining why they feel the need to write, what got them started writing. Being too personal might not turn off an agent—but lack of economy definitely will.

### **4. Don't forget the visuals**

As discussed, some agents will scan a query letter immediately for the bio and based on the author credits alone make an immediate decision: if there are no publication credits whatsoever, some query letters will be discarded. And the way for an agent to immediately tell if there are

publication credits is to look for italics or ALL CAPS, either of which indicate a title. In this way, a discriminating agent can decide on a query letter within about three seconds, without having even read a word.

Some writers do indeed have publication credits, but for whatever reason they forget to italicize them (or put them in caps) in their bios. They risk getting themselves rejected immediately even though, ironically, they have the credits. So if you have book publication credits, make sure they are in all caps, and if you have magazine or newspaper credits, italicize them.

### *8 Positive Elements to Include in Your Author Bio*

#### **1. Publication credits**

This should go without saying. Don't include these if minor, but if at all substantial, then they must be included. This, more than anything, is what separates you from the pack. Prestigious magazine credits will make a difference. Book publication credits will make an even bigger difference, and book publication credits with major houses will make all the difference. Keep in mind, though, that self-published book credits are rarely taken seriously by publishing professionals. Also, if your last book was published in 1972, it won't impress an agent nearly as much as if it had been

published one year ago. So if you've published many books, make sure you make a point of including the date, if recent.

## **2. Track record**

It is an unfortunate reality of the book business that most published books don't sell well. If you are one of the lucky few who has had a book published and has had good sales figures (known as a "track record" in the business), for example, over 20,000 copies sold, then be sure to include this fact. This alone can make the difference in helping you land a book deal.

## **3. Subsidiary Rights Sales**

If one of your previously published books was fortunate enough to have had multiple translation rights sales in other countries, or film rights sales to Hollywood, or major book club rights sales, or serialization, or audio sales, then definitely mention this. For example, some authors are so lucky to have had one of their books sell translation rights to 20 countries, totalling several hundred thousand dollars worth of additional income. Other authors have had their books optioned year after year by Hollywood. These alone can make the difference in an agent wanting to represent you.

#### *4. Strong industry connections*

Some authors who are querying will have been previously published by many excellent publishers over a 5 or 10 year period. Some of these authors will have made connections with powerful acquiring editors over the years, who remain fans of their work and who are still active in the industry. If this is the case, do mention it. If an agent sees, for example, that five powerful, active editors are fans of your work and are eager to read anything new you write, this might help convince him.

#### **5. Awards, grants, fellowships or other laurels**

If you are so lucky to have these, and they are substantial, by all means include them. The more the better.

#### **6. Writing-related education or prestigious residencies**

If you've gone to the trouble to complete an MFA program, then chances are you won't forget to include it in your bio. But often times I encounter writers who've taken extended workshops with prestigious authors, or who won scholarships to prestigious writing residencies or colonies, and who forgot to include this fact. In the craft of creative writing, there is no real formal education; MFA programs come close, but creative writing is by no means a science, and ultimately the MFA doesn't even

necessarily mean anything. Thus the more you can make a case for your writing background, education and skills, the better.

## **7. Potential endorsements**

Again, this seems obvious, but many writers don't think of this in advance. If you already have endorsements in hand from well-known authors, now is the time to mention this. It can make a big difference in getting an agent to pay attention. It also demonstrates how well-connected you are, and associates you in the agent's mind with powerful authors. Alternately, if you are close friends with famous authors and are confident that they will endorse you, mention this.

## **8. Insider knowledge**

I said earlier not to get too personal in your bio, not to include your life history. There is one exception: if your life experience and background are truly relevant to your subject matter, then certainly mention it. It will lend your work authenticity. For example, if you're writing a military thriller and served in the Navy SEALS, this should be mentioned; if you're writing a spy thriller and you worked for the CIA, this counts. But if you're

merely an avid reader of spy thrillers, this would not count and should not be mentioned.

Of course, not every author has all of these positive traits at their disposal. But bios can indeed be built: through patience and hard work, these things can be attained. There are specific ways to go about doing this, but this is beyond the scope of this book (I discuss this topic in depth in my book *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com))

## Chapter 7:

### Fiction Versus Non-Fiction

“Emily Dickinson had only seven of her poems published in her lifetime.”

--Andre Bernard, Bill Henderson, *Rotten Rejections*

Many times I'll finish lecturing a room full of writers and someone in the room will inevitably ask about querying for a book of non-fiction.

Does the writer of non-fiction require a different query letter? If so, how?

It is a good question. There are indeed a plethora of issues unique to the writer of non-fiction, elements that must be emphasized, and elements that must be avoided. While general principles, such as word economy, will remain the same, many of the issues we've covered, such as plot, characters, publication in literary magazines, are geared for the fiction writer only.

Writing a non-fiction query letter is an art in and of itself. Some small detail can make an agent want to read more, while some minor omission can get you rejected. Building on the principles we've already

discussed, let's take a close look at the specific rules for a non-fiction query.

## **Length**

The strict length requirements for a fiction query might be loosened a bit for non-fiction. This does not mean you can exceed one page, but it does mean you can afford to go on a bit more about your concept, the market, the competition, the demographic, your platform and credentials. However, you should only expand on these elements (which we'll cover in depth below) if you truly need to; this does not give you license to loosen up on strict word economy, or to allow irrelevant information.

## **The First Paragraph**

The first paragraph remains the same. You still need to contact a specific agent for a specific reason, and to let him know this right away. The requirements of market research are the same, as is the need to reference a title. The only difference is that it will be easier for you to research titles similar to yours for a perfect comparison.

## **The Second Paragraph**

Here's where the changes begin. You obviously won't be referencing a plot here, or characters, setting, or time period. Instead, you will have to summarize your non-fiction book. You still have to let the agent know what it's about in a pithy, concise way. But your approach will be different.

## **7 Elements to Include When Summarizing Non-Fiction**

### **1. The Genre**

You must be able to immediately and concisely convey the genre. An agent first wants to be able to get a fix on the category before he jumps into a description of a specific idea. Sometimes a single word can do it, such as "parenting" or "popular psychology." This seems obvious, but many times writers will plow ahead, miring an agent in a long, confusing description, without first grounding him in the genre.

### **2. The Hook**

Once you've established the genre, you must differentiate your book within that genre. You must convey your angle or hook immediately. For

example, “My book will be the first home improvement book geared for women.” Or, “My book will be the first dog training book for how to work with attack dogs.” An agent should be able to get the concept within one line or less. When it comes to non-fiction, this hook is one of the most important elements in an agent’s decision process.

### **3. Structure**

Successful practical non-fiction books usually have a powerful structure. 30 Days to Becoming Stress Free. 7 Steps to Taking Over Your Company. 12 Principles of a Spiritual Life. 6 Weeks to Losing the Baby Weight. In many of these books, the structure is synonymous with the very concept and content. Hopefully your book will already be conceived with such a structure; if so, mention it here. It is an effective tool, as it conveys much about your book with few words, thus allowing you to keep your query short. (If you don’t already have a structure, here is another example of how the process of crafting a query letter can help you re-evaluate and possibly re-conceive a better book.)

### **4. Competition**

When it comes to non-fiction, it is absolutely crucial to know your competition and to propose a concept that truly stands out. It is so important that it deserves a mention upfront, in your query letter. Don't devote a lot of space to this here (you can reserve that for the proposal itself), but you do need a line or two which demonstrates that you know what the competition is, and that you have a concept which has never been done before. In the non-fiction world, having a book which stands out from the competition can be synonymous with its very concept. For example, "In the crowded gardening genre, there is not a single book devoted to roses that bloom in winter." Mentioning the competition also helps establish your professionalism, as it shows you have done enough research to know the market before plunging in—which also bodes well for the research you will have done for the content itself.

## **5. Comparison**

While you must establish that there is no other book on the market precisely like your book, you also must be able to offer a comparison to a book which was similar—although not precisely the same—which did well.

As explained above, having a successful comparison helps prove a market exists for the book, and that your book has the potential to become a bestseller. Being unique is not enough. “My book is the only book on the market to examine the green grasshopper of East Africa.” This is unique; there won’t be any competition. But the writer also has not proven there is a market. Referencing a bestseller in the genre can make all the difference.

## **6. Establish the Market**

A successful comparison goes a long way, but it is only the first step. A truly effective query letter will use numbers, statistics and demographics to prove the case that a hungry market exists for a book. For example, “28 million people in America alone suffer from acne. My book will be the only book on the market geared just for them.” Don’t assume that an agent or editor will inherently understand the size of your proposed market, or the demand for a book like yours. Always make the case. When doing so, numbers have power. They help the agent make the case to the publisher, and help the publisher make the case to their sales reps, who in turn make the case to bookstore owners. They also convey a lot of information in a small amount of space, and thus are ideal for a query letter.

## 7. Authenticity

Finally, it helps if you can validate the authenticity of your idea.

Many writers propose, for example, a new program on how to lose weight—yet they never establish that their plan works, or give us reason to believe it does. Sometimes they say they have tried it out on friends and family, or possibly haven’t tried it out at all, but have merely pieced it together from research. They expect us to trust them, but this is not enough. Such a writer will have no chance against a writer who has tested a plan for 20 years at Stanford and can provide conclusive, scientific evidence that it works. (This is the competition you’re up against.) Anything you can add to help prove that your book is the real deal—for example, new research, or testimonials—will go a long way. Ultimately, a huge factor in this will be you—your background, credentials and credibility.

And for that, we turn back to the author bio.

### The Third Paragraph

The third paragraph essentially remains the same, in that it is your author bio. But when querying for a work of non-fiction, certain elements that were crucial for fiction—such as literary magazine credits or endorsements from novelists—will no longer be relevant. Other aspects,

which were not an issue for fiction, will be crucial. There are two in particular:

## **2 Crucial Elements of a Non-Fiction Bio**

### **1. Author credibility and expertise**

As discussed, author credibility and expertise is a major part of the equation when querying for non-fiction. Who you are is as important as your concept; in most cases, the two are inextricable. A book on dog training must come from a dog trainer, while a book on hairstyles must come from a stylist. Your personal background doesn't matter in the fiction world, but when it comes to non-fiction, the more credentialed you are, the better your chances of landing a deal. Experience also helps establish credibility: you might not have a Ph.D., but perhaps you have 30 years of working with animals. Indeed, some book deals are made on author credentials alone, even if the concept is not all that new, and even if it is already a crowded market. If President Obama wants to write a book on diplomacy, for example, he will have no trouble finding a publisher, regardless of what he has to say.

Thus if you have a relevant background or credentials, make sure to play them up here. I've seen authors omit the extent of their expertise or background in their query letters, assuming the agent would know.

## **2. Platform**

In the publishing industry, you will commonly hear the term "platform." An author's "platform" means the venues he already has in place to promote his book. For example a TV or radio show, or national column would be considered a platform. Someone who speaks frequently would be considered to have a platform, albeit a smaller one, as would someone with a fan base of 20,000 people. This has a huge impact on a publisher's decision when it comes to non-fiction.

Thus if you have a substantial platform, the place to mention it is here. This will ideally be your own TV or radio show, a national newspaper or magazine column; regular TV and radio show appearances also work, as well as being quoted regularly in national newspapers and magazines, a following of readers who read your last book, a substantial number of people you speak to each year, or a major internet presence. You need to prove to agents that you're out there in a substantial and sustained enough way to be able to sell books when the time comes.

Of course, not every author has the great credentials to start with, or has the incredible platform. It can seem daunting to authors to ever attain these things, yet it is possible. Platforms can be built. How to go about doing this is beyond the scope of this book, but I do discuss this topic in depth in my book *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com))

### **Different Types of Non-Fiction**

“Non-fiction” is a broad category, and can mean many things. While the principles outlined above hold true for all query letters of non-fiction, there are unique issues when dealing with each genre. For example, if you are querying about a cookbook, your approach will be different than if you’re querying about a serious work of history.

In general, highly practical and prescriptive categories of non-fiction, such as parenting, psychology, diet, fitness and health, tend to warrant the same marketing approach. Query letters should emphasize how such a book can help the reader, how a reader can easily use and implement the techniques in such a book and possibly emerge a different person. Having a structure or plan will be of great consequence. When querying about serious narrative non-fiction, though, such as works of biography,

history and current affairs, there won't be any talk of how such a book can help the reader. Rather, there should be an emphasis on the author's credentials, on his scholarly background, and on his extensive research. And there obviously won't be any mention of a program, steps or a plan.

Memoir falls into a class by itself. It is the only exception to the general rule of non-fiction versus fiction, as it really falls into the category of fiction when it comes to marketing. You will have to emphasize characters, plot, setting—all of the issues pertinent to fiction; likewise, the market and competition won't matter, as it is a unique work. For all intents and purposes, when querying with a memoir, ignore the rules outlined for non-fiction, and follow those for fiction. Incidentally, the rules about non-fiction being easier to sell also disappear when it comes to memoir; it is as hard to sell as fiction.

## Chapter 8:

### Final Issues to Keep in Mind

Stephen King's first four novels were rejected. "This guy from Maine sent in this novel over the transom," said Bill Thompson, his former editor at Doubleday. Mr. Thompson, sensing something there, asked to see subsequent novels, but still rejected the next three. However, King withstood the rejection, and Mr. Thompson finally bought the fifth novel, despite his colleague's lack of enthusiasm, for \$2,500. It was titled *Carrie*.

By this point, you have completed your three paragraphs. Your query is now much stronger, solid in every respect of the word. Now we're going to go over small, final issues, to make sure that your query letter is not only good, but *great*.

#### **The Final Sentence**

Throughout this book I've been stringent about limiting the letter to three paragraphs. But this begs the question: what about a conclusion to the letter? A closing sentence? Should one just conclude a query abruptly after the author biography?

If you were to end your query letter after your bio, with nothing following, it would be satisfactory. Remember, always err on the side of being too brief.

That said, there is nothing wrong with a final, concluding sentence. Something short and courteous, along the lines of, “Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.” Such a sentence would be indented so that it’s given its own paragraph. If you want to call this a fourth paragraph, then you can. But really it’s just a concluding sentence, amply spaced.

Finally, as you go back through your letter one last time, remember that small touches can make the difference in your landing an agent, while small mistakes can signal an amateur. As you take one last look, be sure to avoid these seven common mistakes:

## **7 Common Mistakes**

### *1. Don’t pitch more than one book*

Some writers think an agent will be more likely to take them on if they pitch several books at a time. They think that if they pitch numerous ideas they will increase their chances of an agent liking one, or that if an

agent sees multiple ideas, the agent will realize how prolific they are and will be more likely to take them on. This is not true. When I receive a query letter which says, “Mr. Lukeman, I guarantee you that this will be the beginning of a long relationship. After you represent this book, I will allow you to also represent my romance novel, my science fiction novel, my childrens book and my horror screenplay,” I don’t think of all the money I’ll make. I think that this writer is scattered, and that he will be overwhelming to work with.

It is enough of an accomplishment to get an agent to represent one book. Pitching multiple books not only distracts the agent, but also cheapens each work. If an agent thinks you’ve taken 10 years to craft one work, it will seem as if you’ve put great effort into it; if you pitch five novels at once, the agent might assume you just knocked each one off with a few weeks work, and thus he might be more wary of the quality of the writing.

Additionally, agents tend to focus on particular categories (which is why finding precisely the right one is such an important art). An agent who represents science fiction will probably not want to represent literary fiction, while an agent who represents a cookbook will probably not want

to represent current affairs. Choose one book which is important to you, do the research for the appropriate agent, and focus on pitching just that book.

## **2. Don't mention endorsements from family and friends**

“Mr. Lukeman, my brother read my book and said it was the best he'd ever read—and he's been critical of me my whole life, so I know he wouldn't say that unless he meant it.”

“Mr. Lukeman, my writing group is the one of the biggest in Eastern Kansas, and they've given me their endorsement and blessing to sell this manuscript.”

“Mr. Lukeman, I have a circle of trusted readers—including a gentleman who worked briefly in publishing 20 years ago—and they all say without doubt that I've struck gold.”

Endorsements from family, friends and trusted readers don't mean anything to publishing professionals; if anything, it will bias them against you, as it will give them the impression that you take these seriously. If you think this will impress them, then you don't realize the level of your competition. It's great that people enjoyed your work, but at this level—which is world-class—it's just not relevant.

## **3. Don't be self critical**

Job-hunting advice experts often say that the job applicant's worst enemy is himself. Job candidates tend to get nervous, and for whatever reason they become self-critical in their cover letters and end up pointing out their own weaknesses inadvertently. The same holds true for query letters: writers are often their own worst critics. Before their query letters have concluded, they will often point out at least one flaw in their own writing, or their market, or their background and credentials.

There are enough critics out there—don't give them a head start.

Don't include sentences like:

“I know there are many books out there like mine, but I still feel I have something special.”

“I haven't been writing for very long, but ....”

“I have no background in writing. I hope you won't hold that against me.”

Take one last look over your letter for anything resembling this, and take it out. Be your own champion instead.

#### **4. No small talk**

One of the biggest ways writers waste space in a query letter is to fill it with small talk. For example:

“I know you must be so busy, so I don’t want to waste your time. Let me get right down to it.”

“Forgive me if this letter goes on too long. I have so much to say and don’t know where to begin.”

“I hope you have enjoyed this letter and that it communicated what I wanted to say.”

Go over your letter once again and look for any remnants of small talk. Take them out.

## 5. No givens

Another major space waster is givens, that is, information an agent already knew, or would have taken for granted. For example:

“I would love for you to represent me.”

“I’m willing to promote my books.”

“Just say the word and I’ll send you my manuscript.”

You have to understand that the instant an agent opens a query, he implicitly takes for granted many things, including the fact that you want an agent, that you want him to represent you, that you are ready and willing to

send your manuscript, etc. Give him some credit, and at the same time do yourself a favor by saving wasted space in your query. It's like an actor who stands on stage in a room full of casting directors, and begins by saying, "If you like the monologue I am about to give, then I would be happy to let you hire me." Just get to the point.

## **6. Don't quote your own writing**

I can't tell you how many queries I receive where writers quote their own writing, sometimes at length. For example:

Mr. Lukeman, my writing is so great, let me just take a moment to quote some of it to you:  
"The birds sang together. It was a glorious morning. He knew that this would be the day. He felt ready!" Wasn't that great, Mr. Lukeman? Can't you see why I'm so excited? I know you will be too. Let me now quote something from Chapter 3....

An agent encounters many variations of this. Writers will sometimes open their letters with a quotation from their text; other times they will conclude with it. Sometimes they'll quote one line, sometimes an entire page. Needless to say, don't do it. It is understandable that you are eager for an agent to read your actual work, but quoting your own work in the query

letter will only lend it an air of megalomania. There really is no subtle or humble way to do it—and it is, anyway, beside the point at this stage.

## **7. Don't mention anything else irrelevant**

Given all we've covered, it's hard to say what else might be left. But you'd be surprised—writers can come up with the strangest things. You know what belongs in a query and what doesn't. If you're unsure, delete it. Be strict with yourself. If we haven't covered it here, it doesn't belong there. A query letter can never (or almost never) be too short.

## Conclusion

“Believe in your own identity and your own opinions. Proceed with confidence, generating it, if necessary, by pure willpower. Writing is an act of ego and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going.”

--William Zinsser

Over my last 13 years as a literary agent I think I have seen every type of query under the sun. I've received queries claiming to have the greatest work of the century; queries that offered me any commission I wanted; queries that said “buy now, get one free.” I've received queries that proclaimed I had a 24 hour deadline to respond; queries that, oddly enough, were hate mail; and rambling queries that never pitched any book at all. I've received queries written on elaborate invitation cards, sealed with a bow, and queries handwritten on cardboard. I once received a query that told me I should write an essay on why I think I'm qualified to represent the author, mail it to him, and then he would consider whether to consider me.

Writers will think of—and try—anything, and for that, I salute them. I salute their creativity, their ingenuity, their energy, and most of all, their

optimism. I am a writer myself, so am also in the querying business—not to mention that as an agent I query publishers all day long, and have received more rejections in 10 years than most writers will in a lifetime.

While I admire the urge to stand out, to be different, my final piece of advice is to realize that the goal of a query letter is not to stand out in a cheap way—it is to stand out in a substantial way. This means that the basic structure and form of the query letter needn’t—and shouldn’t—be different. The *content*, the ideas you express, your biography and background should. If you have a great piece of writing, a great concept, a great background, your query letter will write itself. But a query letter, no matter how well-written, will not make up for these.

Perfect the art of the query letter, use the many techniques I’ve given you to achieve success—but remember that ultimately it is your writing, your craft, that will land you that agent and get you published. A great query letter will give you the opportunity (which most writers never have) to be considered seriously. It will give you the chance to be read closely by a top professional, to have your writing considered in its own right. But remember that the way you approach an agent is equally important. A great query letter sent in the wrong way, or to the wrong agent, will get you rejected. For a more in depth discussion of the topic, consider reading my

book, *How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent* ([www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com)), or read any other books on the topic written by publishing professionals. In either case, by having a great query letter, you have a huge head start. Your foot is now in the door, and you are now much closer to going where thousands of other authors cannot.

But you owe it to yourself to be ready when you get there. Perfect the query letter, but perfect your writing too. Continue to strive to make it the very best it can be. Keep reading, keep studying and above all, keep writing. If so, one day, I assure you, you will be published.

And no matter what, don't give up.

# Checklist:

## 30 Mistakes to Avoid in Your Query Letter

Below find a checklist of 30 query letter pitfalls that can get you rejected. Go through the list and check off each one, confirming that you have not made the mistake.

### **Formatting**

- Letter filled with underlining
- Letter filled with bold
- Letter filled with italics
- Font too small or too big
- Font hard to read or colored
- No letterhead, and cheap quality paper
- Used a cheap printer
- Forgot to add the date
- Contact information in the body of the letter

### **Content**

- No opening reference to a book the agent sold

- \_\_\_ No clear hook or logline of the concept
- \_\_\_ No mention of the genre
- \_\_\_ Plot description over three sentences
- \_\_\_ Mentioned character names
- \_\_\_ Confusing or inappropriate comparison to other books in the genre
- \_\_\_ No comparison at all
- \_\_\_ Mentioned subplots
- \_\_\_ Author bio over five sentences
- \_\_\_ Irrelevant information in author bio
- \_\_\_ Mentioned minor credits in author bio
- \_\_\_ Author bio overly personal
- \_\_\_ Didn't put publication credits in italics or caps
- \_\_\_ Pitched more than one book
- \_\_\_ Letter had more than 3 paragraphs
- \_\_\_ Letter exceeded one page
- \_\_\_ Quoted sample writing
- \_\_\_ Included small talk
- \_\_\_ Was self critical
- \_\_\_ Mentioned givens
- \_\_\_ Mentioned endorsements from family, friends or barely known authors

# Ask a Literary Agent

by

Noah Lukeman

## Table of Contents

- \* Should my agent let me know which publishers/editors have read my work, and provide me with copies of the rejection letters?
- \* I am just starting out and have never been published. What should I put in my bio?
- \* My agent is unwilling to sell world rights to my book. What should I do?
- \* How does one land a job as a literary agent?
- \* Should I revise my work for a prospective agent?
- \* Can I fire my agent mid-submission?
- \* Should I query an agent with several books at once?
- \* Once I land an agent, how long does it take to land a book deal?
- \* What is the ideal page count for a first novel?
- \* How many agents should I approach?
- \* If my agent doesn't like my next book, should I fire him?
- \* Why won't publishers respond?
- \* How long should I wait to hear back about my manuscript?
- \* How many copies must a book sell to be considered a success?
- \* Will being published by a small press help my career?
- \* Can self-publishing damage your career?
- \* Is there a market for literary fiction set in a country outside of the United States?
- \* Can I be represented by two literary agents?
- \* Should I finish the manuscript of my novel before submitting to agents?
- \* Do agents really read the first five pages? Or just the first five sentences?
- \* What do you look for in a logline?
- \* How do I find out what agent represents a novel in my genre?
- \* Is my agent (even if fired) entitled to commission my option book?
- \* Do some agents give up if a manuscript doesn't sell in the first round of submissions?
- \* Is it normal to have different agents for U.S. and international publication?
- \* Is it detrimental to have your book published as a trade paperback original?
- \* Is editor turnaround so high that you can re-submit in just a few years?
- \* Should I pay a fee to have my work published?
- \* Should I pay to have my work published?
- \* Can I self-publish my ebook while pursuing a print deal?
- \* My agent is not responding. What should I do?
- \* Is my age a problem?

- \* Does my novel have to be set in America?
- \* Should I use a pseudonym?
- \* Should I serialize my entire novel on my blog?
- \* How many revisions?
- \* How long should I wait for my agent?
- \* Was I correct to accept a deal directly from a publisher?
- \* How should I handle my sales history?
- \* Will an agent represent me just for one genre of fiction?
- \* How do I switch agents?
- \* Can I post excerpts of my work online?
- \* Can I re-submit after revision?
- \* Will my location affect my ability to land a deal?
- \* Should I submit to magazines first?
- \* Do I need photographs?
- \* Which publishers should I submit to?
- \* Can I submit requested material via email?
- \* Can I submit to multiple agents simultaneously?
- \* How to phrase my query letter?
- \* Should memoir be treated as fiction?
- \* Should I add anything extra in my query letter?
- \* Is it more important for the story to be well done or marketable?
- \* If I self-publish first, will it hurt my chances?

## Introduction

I started “Ask a Literary Agent” because I thought aspiring authors would appreciate a venue in which they could ask an active literary agent any question they wished, and receive an in-depth response on the topic. Authors often have numerous questions about how to get published and about the (complex) publishing industry, and yet it can be hard to find all of the answers.

I imagined the blog would be slow at first, and yet the outpouring of questions was tremendous, and hasn’t stopped since. Clearly there is a need for this (free) service, and I am glad that I can, in some small way, be of help to the writing community.

I received a tremendous range of questions, ranging from the basic to the sophisticated. With each answer, I endeavored to add even a bit more than what was asked, so as not only to answer the question directly, but also to use it as an opportunity to educate aspiring authors, in depth, on all facets of the industry. I deliberately chose to tackle many tough (and in some cases, controversial) questions, questions which other agents may choose to avoid, and offer answers which you may not find elsewhere.

I thought it would be helpful for authors to have all of the content at their fingertips. While the content in this short book can also be located by manually scrolling through all of the archives on the blog, I thought it easier for readers to have all of this information conveniently in one place, as a reference, especially in

one file. This way, you can save and reference all of the information on your computer and/or read it at your leisure on your e-reading devices. You can also then more easily help other aspiring authors, by simply forwarding this file to them.

I hope the information in these pages is of help to you. If you have any questions, please do feel free to visit the blog and ask away.

Keep writing!

**“Should my agent let me know which publishers/editors have read my work, and provide me with copies of the rejection letters?”**

**“Is any agent, by the rules of the profession, obliged to inform you specifically of where your work has been submitted and give you copies of responses?”**

**--Anonymous**

This is an excellent question, and one which speaks to many issues.

First of all, you must realize that there are no firm and solid “rules” that all agents unanimously adhere to; every agent operates differently. Some agents will provide their authors a detailed rundown of the name of every editor and publisher that he’s submitting their work to, along with copies of rejection letters, while other agents will not provide any such information to an author, at any point.

For those authors who are kept in the dark, it can certainly be quite frustrating. After years of working hard on your manuscript, after finally landing an agent, after knowing your work is being actively submitted, suddenly, you receive nothing but silence. As months pass, this silence can become ever more frustrating. If your agent is not letting you know how many publisher he’s sent it to, which publishers he’s targeted, when he’s sent it out, or how many rejections have come in, you may naturally wonder how hard the agent is working on your book (or if at all), or if the agent is even doing his job effectively. It can also be frustrating for authors to only hear back from their agent that X number of publishers have passed, without being

provided with copies of the rejection letters, or hearing any of the reasons why, or without having any idea of how many publishers still have it, or what the strategy is.

From an agent's perspective, however, providing an author with this information is not always such a simple matter. Some authors, if provided with this information upfront, can try to micromanage the agent, and tell him where to submit (or not to submit). Some authors can monitor the list too carefully, asking for too-frequent updates regarding who has rejected their work. Some authors, if kept in the loop and updated as rejections come in, may become extremely anxious when they hear about the rejections, and thus cause the agent anxiety (which the agent must be free of if he is to stay positive and do his job well). Some authors may, as a result of hearing of the rejections, second guess the agent's submission choices; others may insist on revising their work mid submission based on a particular rejection letter. Some authors may even try to bypass the agent and contact the editor directly, either to try to desperately convince the editor, or to attempt to cut out the agent (this can be of particular concern if the author and agent have a falling out along the way). Other authors can become so upset at being rejected that, if they have a list of who has rejected their work, they may send vindictive letters to the editors (and/or call them), which in turn reflects poorly on the agent. Thus, agents have some cause to be wary in doling out too much information (at least upfront).

That said, this is still no excuse for an agent to keep an author in the dark. While a book is actively on submission, authors have the right to at least know when the agent is initiating the submission, how many publishers he will be submitting to, whether he plans additional rounds of submissions if the first round fails,

approximately when that will take place, what is the ultimate number of publishers he will approach, and how long he estimates the entire submission will take. Authors also have a right to know whether their agent is approaching large or small publishers, and how many of each. Agents can provide all of this without releasing the names of the particular editors upfront, and there is no reason they should not.

Ultimately, if every publisher has passed, then when the submission is over, you absolutely have a right to ask the agent to supply you with the submission list, which should include the names of the publishers and the particular editors. This is crucial for you to have, since it will both allow you to evaluate if your agent did a thorough job, and, if you need to switch agents, it will allow your future agent to evaluate whether there are any stones left unturned that he can submit to. Your agent should also provide you with copies of the rejection letters from editors. It will be especially helpful for a future agent to know if you have any editor fans out there that should be included in your next submission.

In the big picture, this problem can be averted if you spend more time thoroughly researching potential agents upfront. If your research demonstrates that an agent has recently sold many books by high profile authors to major houses, then there is not as much to worry about, even if he's not as in touch with you as you would hope. On the other hand, if research shows that he represents few authors, and has made few sales and to only smaller houses (and a long time ago), then there is more cause for concern. So (as I discuss at length in my books) be very thorough in your research, and choose carefully. If you make the right choice, then issues like submission lists will not be a major cause for concern.

"I am just starting out and have never been published. What should I put in my bio?"

"First of all, thank you so much for all of your posts and your free e-book. I have learned a lot and I greatly appreciate it.

Anyway, I recently read your HOW TO WRITE A GREAT QUERY LETTER and I had one question. You mention that a writer should not mention his smaller accomplishments, because it makes him seem like an amateur. I was wondering then, if a writer is just starting out, has never had anything published, and doesn't have a lot of notable things to put in a bio section of a query letter, then what should he put? What can a beginning writer add into the section that will both attract the agent and not make him doubt the writing abilities of the writer? Basically I am young and I have written one novel (which I have tossed) and I am half way through my second one (which I hope to publish one day). Unfortunately I don't have a lot of writing experience that would make an agent interested in reading my manuscript. I don't feel this takes away from the quality of my work but I understand that it may be harder to get someone to look at it in the first place. So anything that you could tell me would be of great help.

Thanks again for all of your work. It helps immensely!"

--Jake

This is a good question, and one which gets asked frequently.

Aspiring authors who don't have any writing credentials, writing-specific education and/or publication credits (or who only have minor credits), wonder if there exists some magic language that they can add to their query letters to make up for this fact—unfortunately, there is not. No matter how eloquently you phrase your bio, if you do not have the credentials, an agent will know right away; no fancy language will be able to hide this fact, or make up for it.

Thus it's best to just say it like it is, and state that you have no credentials and that this is your first work (this is not necessarily a strike against you, as there always remains the thrill of discovery). Even better, you can keep the query letter short and not mention anything at all, ending the letter abruptly after your synopsis and concluding sentence. This at least demonstrates self-awareness and word economy.

The alternative (and unfortunately, more common) approach, is for writers to use up several sentences to either list very minor credentials and/or to dance around the fact that they have no credentials, which can end up comprising a good deal of the letter—and, ironically, serves to emphasize a fact you'd prefer to avoid. It also demonstrates lack of word economy, and wastes the agent's time. The only time it might make sense to elaborate on non-writing related experience is you have had unique life-experience which is directly related to the subject matter of your book (for example, if you have written a crime thriller and spent 30 years working for the FBI).

So, again, if you don't have credentials substantial enough to impress an agent, then simply don't say anything, and allow yourself a shorter query letter.

That said, in the big picture, ultimately the solution is for you to make a sustained effort towards gaining those very credentials which will indeed impress an agent. Just because you've never been published in a major literary magazine, or attended a prestigious writing program, or hold endorsements from famous authors, doesn't mean that you can never attain those things on your own: indeed, many authors who land agents have already managed to attain these things on their own.

This points to a greater issue, which is that many first-time authors approach agents with no credentials whatsoever, expecting agents to build their career from scratch. More seasoned authors understand that a successful publishing career is more often a collaboration between agent and author, with the author already bringing much to the table (and continuing to do so throughout his career), with the agent there to take him that final step and land him the book deal. Most agents can't, for example, be expected to devote years to building your resume for you by sending out your short stories to magazines, or applying to writing programs on your behalf, or networking on your behalf for endorsements; there is a certain amount the author must take into his own hands. This proactive, go-getting mentality tends to be present in many successful authors, whereas it tends to be absent in many unsuccessful authors, particularly those who approach agents for the first time (without any credentials).

You can attain major credentials on your own, but first you must prepare for a sustained effort. Instead of a three or six month plan to attain all the credentials you need, why not give yourself a three or six year plan? With that kind of time, you can attend writing programs, workshops, conferences, colonies; spend extensive time

networking and build an endorsement list; get stories published in magazines and online; begin to build a platform; and most importantly, hone your craft extensively. This doesn't mean you need to refrain from approaching agents before you accomplish all of this; on the contrary, as I said, there is nothing wrong with approaching agents with no credentials whatsoever, and you can work to achieve all of this concurrently with your approaching the industry. But you should always be working to this end, regardless. There are many specific, concrete steps you can take to help get you there (which I explain at length in my book *[How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent](#)*), but perhaps the most important step of all is your willingness to devote a sustained, multi-year effort to building your bio on your own.

**"My agent is unwilling to sell world rights to my book. What should I do?"**

"I think my book's topic resonates with people from other cultures. I know it does--several readers from other countries have contacted me. I used that fact to buttress my request in asking my agent to please try to sell foreign rights. (They never came up initially.) My agent doesn't seem to think it would sell well in other countries and won't try. My publisher says it's not their job. I'm disappointed and aggravated. Your thoughts, please?"

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of "Writers on Writing," a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California

Whenever an agent negotiates a book deal with a publisher, a few major issues are negotiated immediately (usually, verbally), such as the advance, royalties, delivery schedule and payout, and major subsidiary rights, like translation and UK rights. (Dozens of smaller issues will also be negotiated later, during the contractual process.) Thus before the contract is even issued and the deal signed, your agent will know whether he or the publisher will be controlling the world rights to your book.

Publishers will often want to control world rights, because it is to their advantage to do so. If a publisher sells world rights, they will make a commission off of each

sale and more importantly, any foreign income will be lumped into your royalty account and never paid to you unless you first earn back your royalties—thus giving a publisher security should your book not sell in the U.S. But agents will also want to control world rights on your behalf. It is a negotiation. In some cases, publishers will end up controlling them; in others, agents. For example, a publisher might offer a major six or seven figure advance, but insist that such a high advance is predicated on their controlling world rights. In other cases, the advance offer may be low, and the agent may insist that the publisher can only acquire the book for such a low advance if the agent can control world rights. In some cases, three publishers might offer matching or similar advances, but one of them may be willing to give up world rights, and that may be what makes the difference. In some cases, the world rights may be very valuable (for example, with a book about European history), while in other cases, world rights may be unlikely to sell at all (for example, a book about American history), and this will affect the publisher's or agent's fervor in fighting for them.

If an agent ends up controlling world rights, then it is the agent's responsibility to shop them around the world. Most U.S. literary agents engage co-agents based in the major bookbuying countries of the world; once they sell a book for which they have retained world rights, they will contact all of their agents, let them know of the sale, and ask them if they would like to represent the book in their territory. If particular co-agents in particular countries don't feel that the book would be successful in their

country, then there is not much the primary agent can do; but the primary agent must at least query these co-agents and try.

In your case, you should ask your agent if he has done this. If he says no, and if he refuses to even query his co-agents, then you should ask him to write you a letter which formally reverts the foreign rights back to you and which absolves his agency of any commission for foreign sales. (Your publisher is correct in saying that it is not their job if your agent controls the rights.)

Once you have the rights back, there is not much you can do on your own; international co-agents will rarely want to do deal directly with authors on individual books, as they prefer to deal with established literary agents with whom they have dozens of deals. But if you ever switch literary agents down the road, then at least you will have the legal right to allow a new agent to shop the foreign rights to this book. Agents will rarely want to represent someone merely for the sake of representing foreign rights for a particular book, but if you write a second book, and a new agent wants to represent that in the U.S., then he might also want to represent the foreign rights to your previous book.

Perhaps most importantly, all of this points to the fact that your current agent is not doing his job if he will not at least ask his co-agents to represent your book overseas. If that is the case, consider switching agents for your next book. Keep in mind, though, that foreign rights are not always easy to sell (it varies greatly, depending on the genre), and it may be that your agent ran it by his co-agents and they rejected it. Don't make assumptions until you've gathered all the facts.



## How does one land a job as a literary agent?

"My daughter will be graduating from high school in June and will be pursuing a degree in journalism in the fall. Her goal is to become a literary agent. Although I trust she will receive good advice at the university she plans to attend, she has many questions now about coursework and internships that I can't answer. Can you help me to advise her?"

--Anonymous

Your daughter is very wise to plan so far in advance, and this alone will give her a great advantage. Indeed, one of the best ways to land a job in the publishing industry is to simply allow yourself enough time to do so—in her case, with 4 years of planning, her chances will be very strong.

You should not assume that her university will prepare her: most universities do not, in fact, teach students much practical information about the publishing industry, or prepare them for a job in it. When I attended Brandeis, for example, I was a double major in English and Creative Writing, and yet there wasn't a single course offered about the publishing industry. So unless she is attending a college which specifically boasts a publishing program (like Emerson), then you can assume there will be no instruction or guidance. Some schools will host guest publishing speakers from time to time (Harvard, for example, has a "Writers in the Parlor" series, where

I spoke last Fall)—but this is still not the same as having a full-fledged publishing program.

As far as her coursework, the best thing she can do is to major in English and/or Creative Writing. This is by no means a prerequisite for working in publishing, but it is certainly the most relevant major. Having a legal background (particularly entertainment law) is also good preparation for becoming an agent, since a good portion of what agents do involves deal-making and lengthy contracts.

Much more important, though, will be internships. She must intern in the publishing industry before she graduates (for example, during the summer months). Internships are probably, in fact, the single most important thing one could do to lay the groundwork for a job, since they provide practical (and resume) experience, allow her to see if she really likes the profession, provide knowledge about the industry, and perhaps most importantly, give one personal connections. These contacts (and the resume experience) will be all-important when it comes time for the job search. If two candidates compete for a job, and one has publishing internship experience and the other does not, it is nearly certain that the former will land the position. But she mustn't assume that, because she has a dozen contacts, she will be assured a job upon graduation; publishing is all about timing, and if there are no openings when she graduates, her contacts may be useless. Thus she mustn't become complacent. If she can't find any internships with a literary agency, then she should be open to finding one in a publishing house. And it should be in New York if at all possible.

Although it is still a bit early for her, at some point before graduation she should start reading the industry trades on a weekly basis ([publisherweekly.com](http://publisherweekly.com) and

[publishersmarketplace.com](http://publishersmarketplace.com) are good places to start). She will absorb much industry information, and she will start to learn the names of companies and of people in the industry. As a starting point, it will be crucial that she has the names of all the major publishers and imprints memorized—it is a crucial foundation for becoming an agent, and it will be necessary, too, for her to know which publishers to apply to.

Finally, when she graduates and it is time for her to actually search for a job, she should 1) move to New York City (if she doesn't already live here); 2) submit her resume as widely as possible to literary agencies; 3) give herself at least 6 months of searching (the biggest mistake candidates make is giving up after a few weeks or months); 4) not settle for a job which is not to her liking, or work for a boss who is unpleasant; and 5) apply for assistant jobs at book publishers if she cannot find one on the agency side. Working for a major book publisher is also great for the resume, and will help her land an eventual agency job. She should also remain open to the idea of working for the Subsidiary Rights departments of major publishers. This is something that few candidates consider, but which can end up being the most effective technique: it can be a much easier job to land, and literary agencies like to hire employees with Sub Rights experience, because many of the job duties overlap.

In the ideal world, she will land a job at a literary agency as an assistant literary agent, work for an agent who is encouraging and supportive, and within a year or two will be promoted, handling a list of her own authors. Some agents (and agencies) are more supportive of promoting their assistants than others, though; if she finds herself in an environment where assistants are not promoted after several years (or at

all), or where her boss is not supportive, she may need to eventually switch agencies in order to become a full-fledged agent.

### Should I revise my work for a prospective agent?

"I'm a little confused...my manuscript has been back and forth to my agent now for almost a year and a half with only positive and encouraging verbal feedback, but no written reports. I have now sent the second book after the agent says he wanted to see it, but feedback is still having to be prompted. The agent only reads exclusively, so I just don't know what to do. Is it normal to take this long? Should I expect more feedback? Would it be okay for me to maybe send it to a few other agencies?"

--Louise

You are really asking three questions here: 1) How long should you wait to hear back from an agent about your manuscript? 2) Should you grant an agent exclusive reading time? and 3) If a prospective agent asks you to revise your manuscript (with no guarantee that he will represent you), should you do so?

I already answered the first two questions on this blog. Please see the September 22, 2009 posting titled, "How long should I wait to hear back about my manuscript?" The only point I might add to that is that if you do indeed grant an agent exclusive reading time, then you should not give him more than 3 months exclusive reading time for a finished manuscript, or more than 2 months for a

proposal. In your case, given that it has been over a year, you should certainly not grant this agent any more exclusive reading time. You should start querying other agents simultaneously.

In general, if you are debating revising your manuscript for a prospective agent, keep in mind the following: if an agent asks to see a revision of your work, and his comments are specific for what he'd like to see revised, and you agree with those comments, then go for it. However, don't assume a nice or long rejection letter detailing problems is an invitation to revise and resubmit—only assume so if the agent specifically requests to see another version. In most cases, if an agent rejects a work and does not specifically ask to see a revision, then the agent does not truly want to see it again, even if it is revised. You don't want to fall into the trap of following false leads and revising a manuscript endlessly.

Additionally, if your gut tells you that the agent's comments are wrong, or that he doesn't get your work or share your vision, then don't revise. At the end of the day, you are the one that needs to live with your work.

### Can I fire my agent mid-submission?

"My agent did a first round of submissions for my book, all of which resulted in passes. I'm starting to get a bad feeling about my agent. We don't click. Honestly, I don't think he likes me very much, and the feeling is mutual at this point. Is it possible to change agents at this point? The book has only been submitted to about seven or so publishers. There are still many left...."

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of "Writers on Writing," a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California

Legally, you may not have the option to fire your agent--it will depend on the agency agreement you signed (if any). If you did not sign an agreement, then you can legally fire him at any time. If the agreement you signed does not have a clause which specifically states that you have the right to terminate, then you are not allowed to terminate, and that agent has the legal right to represent (or at least be entitled to commission on) your book in perpetuity, whether you like it or not. If the agreement you signed has a clause which states that you have the right to terminate if you follow certain procedures (for example, giving 30 days notice in writing), then if you follow those procedures, the agreement will be terminated on the effective date, and you will be free to do as you like. Some agents work without agreements, some use

agreements with no termination clauses, and others will use different language in their termination clauses, so it can be complex, and is case specific.

Furthermore, terminating mid-submission can be particularly complex. Some agency termination clauses anticipate this scenario and offer language which states that if you terminate mid submission, then the agreement will terminate—BUT if one of the publishers still considering should make an offer at some point in the future, then the agency will be entitled to the commission.

If you don't have a legal basis to terminate, all is not necessarily lost. Practically speaking, many agents are often willing to just terminate an agreement if an author is unhappy with them (and vice versa); some agents, though, will insist on holding an author to the language. Sometimes simply asking nicely will get you released from the agreement, whereas if an author is demanding and threatening, it may backfire, and an agent may insist on his commission. In any case, it will be vital that you obtain a copy of the submission list from the agent (a new agent can't submit without it), so it is best not to alienate him.

The best way to avoid such a legal mess to begin with is to spend more time doing research upfront, and to choose your agent very carefully. As I often say, if there's anything worse than not landing an agent, it's landing an agent who is ineffective, and who keeps you bound to an agreement.

The other issue you must consider is that, just because an agent exhausted a first round of submissions and received seven passes, it doesn't necessarily mean he's doing a bad job. Many books can take 30 or more rejections until they find a publisher, so one needs patience, and mustn't leap to conclusions. Whether your

agent is doing a good job depends not on the number of initial rejections, but rather on 1) which publishers he submitted to; 2) how appropriate they are for your work; 3) which particular editors he submitted to; 4) how he timed the submission; and 5) how much time it took to complete the first round. If, for example, it took him an entire year to submit to just 7 editors, and they are the wrong 7 editors, then he's doing a bad job and you should fire him. But if he's received 7 responses in just 2 weeks, and they are all from excellent editors at excellent houses who read your book carefully, then you don't have cause to fire him. I actually discuss this very issue at length in my book, [How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent](#). In the chapter "How to Keep Your Agent (and When to Let Him Go)," I discuss what it's like to work with an agent on a daily basis, what you should expect from him, and what he should expect from you. Too often, author-agent relationships fall apart simply because of mutual misunderstandings and lack of clear communication. If an author has a better idea of what to actually expect from an agent (and vice versa), then it can be much easier to maintain a happy, working relationship.

### Should I query an agent with several books at once?

**"Mr. Lukeman: My second book was just published in November. Is it too late for me to find an agent to represent my financial interests going forward on this work? If it is not, do agents typically expect a lower percentage of the revenue since the book is already placed and published? I have a third almost completed. Should I look for someone to represent both? What are your thoughts? Thanks."**

**--John Bingham**

You are asking several questions here, and we'll start by addressing what is one of the more universal questions for aspiring authors: if you have written multiple books, or if you have multiple book concepts, should you query an agent about all of them at once?

As a rule of thumb, when researching and querying agents, it's best to choose one concept and stick to it. This will enable you to be more targeted when researching and approaching agents, and to be more focused in your query letter. It will make you seem less scattered, and will help an agent quickly and easily get his mind around the concept at hand. (Some queries are so scattered that half the agent's battle is trying to figure out exactly what the work is about.) Querying with one concept at a time will also make sure it gets the attention it deserves: when someone pitches ten concepts at once, it can cheapen all of them.

The downside of querying with just one concept is that there is always the remote chance that agents dislike the concept you queried about, but would have been interested in a concept you never mentioned. But then again, if you choose one concept and are rejected, there is nothing to prevent you from querying agents all over again with one of your other concepts.

While this is a basic rule of thumb, as with everything in publishing, the answer can become infinitely more complex, depending on the particular scenario. For example, do you have one fiction and one non-fiction concept? (In which case you should most likely query separate agents for each.) Have you written four novels, and are they all part of a series? (You should query with the first book alone, but mention that it is part of a series.) Are your six concepts all non-fiction, and all in different genres? (Many agents will focus on certain genres, and an agent who represents serious history may not be interested in representing a commercial fitness book.) Have you written one academic work and one for the trade? (Agents will rarely represent purely academic books, and you may need to submit directly to a university press.) Is one of your books heavily illustrated and the other straight text? (The agent who represents a book of straight text may not want to represent a coffee table book.) Etc. etc.

As you can see from these few scenarios, agents' needs differ radically, and it would be fairly unusual to find an agent who is eager to represent one author for a broad array of genres. Additionally, an important part of landing an author a deal, particularly when it comes to non-fiction, is her expertise and credibility in a particular genre—thus it may be easy to land a deal for a work of history from a

history professor at Harvard, but impossible to land this same author a cookbook deal. Likewise, the agent who represents literary fiction may not want to represent commercial fiction—and vice versa.

In your particular case, you also asked, “Is it too late for me to find an agent to represent my financial interests going forward on [an already published] work? If it is not, do agents typically expect a lower percentage of the revenue since the book is already placed and published?” The bulk of the agent’s effort takes place before a book is published: the primary role of the agent is to help find a publisher, negotiate a deal and negotiate a contract; they may also help brainstorm a concept, edit a proposal, and work on subsidiary rights. What an agent does not do is get involved in publicity and promotion—that is the job of the publicist. Thus in most cases, there is very little, if anything, for an agent to do once a book is published, and thus it would be unusual for an agent to want to represent an already published book (unless there is sub-rights work to do), and you may not even want this, as you may end up paying him for nothing. The standard industry commission is 15%, and it is unusual for an agent to vary from this, regardless of what stage a book is in.

### Once I land an agent, how long does it take to land a book deal?

**"How long does it take for publishers to make a decision on a MS? My agent has had my MS to some publishing houses for almost a year."**

**--Anonymous**

It would be convenient to tell you that an agent's submission takes exactly 10 days, or 3 weeks, or 2 months—but this would be simplistic. To give you a thorough response, one must take into account many variables. No two submissions are the same, and no two agents operate the same exact way.

To begin with, the length of time it will take your agent to get a response from publishers will depend on whether you have written fiction or non-fiction, and on whether your proposal (if non-fiction) is, say, 10 pages or 80 pages, or whether your finished manuscript (if fiction) is, say, 200 or 500 pages. Obviously, the shorter the proposal or manuscript, the greater the likelihood of a swift response.

Also affecting response time is your particular agent's methodology. Some agents will submit a work to, say, 40 publishers simultaneously, in one massive round, while others will submit to only a few publishers at a time, in rounds, and wait to hear back before submitting another round. If your agent's methodology is the former, then you may have an answer in a matter of weeks or even days, while if the latter, a submission can drag on for many, many months.

Also affecting response time is how aggressive your agent is in following up with publishers. Some agents send out proposals or manuscripts and don't prod

publishers for months; others will get on the phone the next day and ask if they've read it. Another factor is how well-respected your agent is: submissions from some agents will get read right away, while submissions from others might sit on a pile for many weeks. Another factor is your agent's choice of editors: some editors are known for fast responses, while others are known to take their time. Additionally, if an editor likes a work he will often have to share it with colleagues; thus even if he reads quickly, his colleagues may take longer, and this can affect response time.

In general, if I had to make a blanket estimate, I would say that a good agent should be able to hear back from a proposal submission within 8 weeks, and from a manuscript submission within 12 weeks. If your agent submits in rounds, then you will have to tack on that period of waiting time for each additional round.

There are exceptions, but in general, there is no reason why any particular round of submissions should take much longer than this. And even if your agent works in rounds, there is no reason why any given submission should drag on for more than a year. It sounds, in your case, as if your agent is submitting to too few houses, in rounds which are too small, and is waiting too long to hear back.

When you sign with an agent, always request an out clause, which will give you the option of terminating the relationship after, say, six months or one year, if things aren't going the way you'd hoped. This way, if your agent is non-responsive, or taking too long to submit, you can always terminate and go elsewhere. If you terminate, make sure you request that he supply you with the submission list of where your work has been.

That said, keep in mind that if a year has passed and your book hasn't sold, that is not necessarily a reason to fire your agent. It may be that your agent showed your work to 40 publishers within 12 weeks, and did a good job, but your book just didn't sell. There have been times, for example, when I shopped a book around and it didn't sell, and a year or two later I happened to have lunch with a new editor at a new house, submitted it, and it suddenly sold. If an agent is willing to keep your work on submission like this indefinitely, that is a good thing—as long as he has first thoroughly exhausted his primary rounds of submission. Thus I wouldn't necessarily advise you to fire your agent because your book hasn't sold, but I would advise you to fire him if his methodology is inadequate—if he has never submitted it widely, if he has submitted it to the wrong places, or if he is taking months or years to contact only a few editors.

In any case, at the very least, your agent should not keep you in the dark. He should give you some idea of the strategy, of how many places he's submitting it to, and of when he roughly expects to hear back. And he should give you periodic updates, even if it's only once every few months. If he's unwilling to do this, then find someone else.

[What is the ideal page count for a first novel?](#)

"Mr. Lukeman, If I have a debut literary/historical novel that's 110K... is this too long? What would this wordcount mean to agents and editors and how would it affect my chances of representation/publication?"

Thank you,

Renee Goudeau

It's hard enough to land a book deal—don't make it harder on yourself by writing a book which is shorter or longer than industry standard. That means, for example, don't submit a 100 or a 1,000 page novel (I have had both cross my desk). The average manuscript for a novel comes in anywhere between 250 to 400 manuscript pages. In most cases, it is safe to say a first novel should not be shorter than 200 manuscript pages (approximately 50,000 words), and not longer than 500 manuscript pages (approximately 125,000 words). If so, it will raise a red flag for an agent, and may make him less likely to represent you. There are rare exceptions, of course, and there have been times when I have landed a six figure deal for a novel as short as 150 manuscript pages. But again, this is the exception, not the norm, particularly for a first novel. (Once you are an established author, there is more leniency.)

If this seems too strict, keep in mind that the publishing industry as a whole is far more lenient with page count than the film industry: a screenplay must come in at 120 pages, and if it is even a few pages off, it is automatically considered "short" or "long"—so much so, that the first thing a Hollywood executive does is flip to the

last page. If it comes in at 130 or more, some executives will not even read it. Book publishing is not nearly as strict, but that doesn't mean you should take advantage of its relative leniency. Do your best to fall within the range of normalcy.

To speak to a bigger issue, artistically, it is rare for a first novel to truly *need* to be over 500 (or less than 200) manuscript pages. 99% of the time, this sort of page count will point to the fact that there is something wrong with the author's execution. If your first novel is longer than 500 pages, then you may want to ask yourself, for example, whether there are too many characters, settings or subplots. Go through each scene individually and ask yourself whether you can achieve the same goal if that scene were half the length. Conversely, if your page count falls under 200 pages, you may want to consider whether your novel could use a more robust cast of characters, more settings, or more intricate subplots.

### “How many agents should I approach?”

On page 24 of your book [\*The First Five Pages\*](#), which you wrote in the year 2000, you state: "Instead of feeling you have to query twenty or thirty agents, narrow your list to two or three." Lately, however, in your recent blog posts as well as in your newest book, [\*How To Land And Keep A Literary Agent\*](#), you seem to advocate a different approach, one of submitting to 50-100 agents simultaneously. Could you share with us the sorts of factors that have inspired you to evolve your thinking in that regard? Thanks in advance.

-Eric Vincent

A good question, and I can see, in retrospect, how this may seem confusing. If there is ever a future edition of *The First Five Pages*, I will be sure to clarify this. Thanks for pointing it out. Let me clarify here:

In general, I advise that aspiring authors approach at least 50 agents when submitting their query letters. If they can find 100 or even 150 agents who are appropriate for their work (and effective), then so much the better. Publishing is enormously subjective, and sometimes you just need to have a large number of people look at a manuscript in order to find someone who gets it.

The reason I emphasize this point is because I have encountered so many authors who have given up after receiving rejections from merely a handful of agents. It is quite possible that in many of these cases, if these authors had simply queried 50 agents (instead of 10), it would have made the difference in their getting

published. As an agent, when I submit a book to publishers, I will often receive dozens of rejections before I sell it. And in many cases, these books go on to become bestsellers. If I had given up after 5 or 10 or 20 rejections, these books may never have been published.

When I wrote that sentence which you quoted from my book, *The First Five Pages*, it was in the context of urging aspiring authors to take greater care when researching and approaching agents. So many queries I had received were addressed “To Whom it May Concern,” and were about topics that I clearly did not represent. It was obvious to me that these authors had not taken much time to research agents, and were merely sending out as many letters as they possibly could. In the book, I wanted to make the point that it is better to mail off queries to a few, select agents who are well researched than it is to merely shotgun it off to 100 agents whom you have not carefully researched. My intention, though, was not to suggest that one should terminate the submission after only a few queries. On the contrary, as I say throughout the book, one should never give up.

**“If my agent doesn’t like my next book, should I fire him?”**

**“If you submit something to your agent and he/she doesn’t like it, do you believe him/her that it’s not up to par, or do you spring free and find another agent who does like it?”**

**--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of “Writers on Writing,” a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California**

To be thorough, one cannot give a blanket answer for this question, as each case will vary, depending on a number of factors. This really must be answered on a case by case basis. That said, here are a few general issues to consider:

If your agent has represented you for a number of years, sold many books for you, made you a lot of money, and has always been right in the past, and one day you come to him with a new manuscript and he doesn’t like it, then chances are that he knows what he’s talking about. You should respect his opinion, put it aside and write something new. Having representation with a good agent is very valuable in and of itself, and it may be worth setting aside a particular book to continue that relationship, particularly if you trust your agent’s opinion. You always need your agent to be excited about what he’s selling: if he’s not, then you don’t want him to be out there selling it. (Keep in mind that I say “chances are,” because this business is not a science, and there is always a remote possibility that your agent, who had

always been right in the past, makes a mistake in this case, and steers you away from writing the next *Da Vinci Code*. One never knows.)

On the other hand, if your agent has never landed you any book deals, and if you come to him with a new manuscript which you feel strongly about and he rejects it, then it may be time to look elsewhere—particularly if he is unwilling to give you good reasons for his rejection, or to help brainstorm with you to come up with something more marketable.

In either case, before making the decision to terminate the relationship, get some objective feedback: share your manuscript with several trusted readers. If they all have issues with it, too, then it may help you realize that your agent is in the right.

More importantly, there are steps you can take to make sure you don't end up in this situation to begin with. First, you can—and should—bring your agent in at the very beginning of the process: share your concept with him before you begin writing. If he doesn't like it, ask him why. There may be a good reason: perhaps he knows of competitive proposals, or recalls similar proposals that weren't able to find a publisher or that performed poorly as published books. Perhaps he can help you fine-tune the concept, or brainstorm to help you come up with a new concept altogether.

If you are writing fiction, you can share pages with him as you go: for example, before spending years writing 500 pages, stop at page 50 and show him the pages and a detailed synopsis for the rest. If he's a good agent, he should be able to make an evaluation based on this. If he doesn't like it, it can save you years of writing.

Agents will appreciate that you respect them enough to bring them in early, and it will make them feel more invested in the project. If you don't trust your agent's opinion enough to do this, then he probably shouldn't be your agent to begin with. And if you are the type of author who writes whatever he feels like writing, regardless of what others think, then you need to realize that a long term career in publishing needs to be collaborative.

That said, there is always the human factor: agents have been wrong about many famous books in the past, and they will be wrong many times in the future. In this industry, one can only make an educated guess. If you have a burning passion for a particular manuscript you've written, and your gut screams that you should go elsewhere, then sometimes you will need to listen to that. Just don't make the decision hastily: in my book, [\*How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent\*](#), I discuss the six reasons to drop an agent, and all the factors you must consider carefully before doing so. If you terminate the relationship over a particular manuscript, you may find yourself in a position where you cannot sell the new manuscript and cannot find a new agent.

### Why won't publishers respond?

“Mr. Lukeman, maybe you could comment on the problem of even getting publishers to look at a manuscript. My frustrating experience has been that they simply ignore it, do not send it back even when you've included an SASE, and do not answer your polite inquiries by mail, even a year or two later. This has happened to me more than once. I've submitted the first 20 pages of my novel as per submissions requirements for a number of publishers, and even though their website says they'll answer in, say, four months, they just ignore my submission and keep it for years. I never hear a word from them. I can't even get my 20 pages back from them because they don't bother answering inquiries. This seems to be standard practice in the publishing industry these days. How does a writer get around this?”

--Anonymous

To begin with, you need to find a literary agent first. In the vast majority of cases, editors at major publishers won't even consider a submission (whether it's a query letter, 20 pages, or an entire manuscript) unless it comes from a reputable literary agent. They will likely just send back a form letter stating that you must submit through an agent--or they may discard your pages and not respond at all. Most likely, your package was opened by an assistant (or an intern), and the editor in question never even knew of its existence.

Second, in your case it sounds as if you are concerned about getting your submitted pages returned to you. As a rule of thumb, when you submit pages, assume that they won't be returned. Even if they are returned, they will rarely be in pristine condition, and you certainly won't want to re-circulate worn pages for a new submission. If your submitted material is so important to you that you absolutely must have it back (for example, original documents or photographs), then you must be certain in advance that the recipient is aware that you are sending it and is willing to return it.

Third, when you do approach agents, I would strongly recommend your approaching them with a one page query letter, as opposed to sending 20 pages (I discuss this topic at length in my free book, [\*How to Write a Great Query Letter\*](#)). I would also suggest your approaching a large number of agents simultaneously (at least 50), so that you are not sitting around for a year waiting to hear. As a rule of thumb, a query letter should be responded to within 2 to 6 weeks, a proposal within 4 to 8 weeks, and a finished manuscript within 6 to 12 weeks; there is no reason you should ever have to wait an entire year for anyone. If you haven't heard after 4 months, you likely never will.

### How long should I wait to hear back about my manuscript?

"There is a local, regional publisher interested in the project I have submitted to her, however she says she doesn't have time to read it all now. Would it be disloyal for me to submit it to another publisher?"

--Anonymous

Waiting time can be a major issue in most authors' writing careers. I can't begin to tell you how many authors I've met who tell me that they won't submit their manuscript elsewhere—or even begin to think about writing a new book—until they first hear back from a particular agent or publisher. When I ask them how long they've been waiting, they often say several months. Some tell me they've been waiting for *years*, putting their career on hold all of this time.

This is problematic for several reasons: first, because publishing is so subjective, and because agents' and editors' needs change so often, it is impossible to predict if any given agent or editor will like your work, no matter how likely they may seem. You must understand that, statistically, the chances are that any given submission will end in rejection. This is why getting published is mostly about the numbers: the author who submits to 50 or 100 agents or publishers will stand a much greater chance of getting published than the author who submits to 10. Thus the author who submits to only a few people and who then sits back waiting to hear is in all likelihood just wasting his time.

Second, publishing is a slow industry to begin with. It takes time to read a 300 or 400 page manuscript: the average response time for a 400 page manuscript will be at least 6 to 8 weeks. If you want to submit to 50 agents, there is no way you can do so by submitting to one person at a time, unless you are willing to spend five years submitting a particular manuscript (which I would never advise). An aggressive submission can—and should—successfully reach 50 or 100 agents within 6 months. You cannot achieve this unless you are submitting widely, and simultaneously.

Third, if you put your life on hold and spend months waiting for just one response, chances are that, with nothing else to do, you will dwell on this person, and will invest a lot emotionally on his response. If the response finally comes and it is a rejection, it will upset you much more. But if you had had your manuscript out with 100 agents, and 5 rejections had landed in a single day, it would hardly phase you: you would tell yourself that it is still out with 95 others. This will make the psychological roller-coaster of a submission much easier to handle. And it is important to manage the psychology of a submission.

Fourth, you should not look to the industry for validation. Many authors tell me that they will wait to hear whether the industry accepts their novel before they consider whether to continue writing. This is a big mistake. You must remember how subjective the industry is, and realize that even if 100 agents reject your manuscript, it doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't eminently publishable. You must reach a point where *you* are satisfied with your work. When you do, get behind it and stay behind it, regardless of how many rejections come in.

Finally, there should never be any downtime in your writing. Writing is a muscle, and the more you write, the better you will become. When you finish one book, turn immediately to the next, and don't use a submission as an excuse to take a break and not do the hard work of continuing to write every day. A writer should never be "waiting"—only "writing" or "submitting." In fact, the word "waiting" should not even exist in the successful author's vocabulary.

You may encounter some agents or editors who demand that you give them exclusive reading time. If they are legitimate, and sincerely like your work, then in select cases, you might grant them exclusive reading time—but only for a finite period of time, which should be clearly stated in your letter. Otherwise, don't submit exclusively. You don't owe "loyalty" to an agent or editor who you've never met and who may not even like your work. You do, however, owe loyalty to yourself. As an author, there are so few things you can control in this industry. Waiting time is one of them. And it should indeed stay in your control.

### How many copies must a book sell to be considered a success?

"I would be curious what it means to 'sell poorly' at a major house. Isn't this subject to interpretation? Okay, we can all agree that selling 500 or 1000 books from a major house means that a book did poorly. But a first novel by a first-time author except in some rare cases) isn't going to sell 50,000 copies anyway, so what kinds of numbers do big houses expect? And how do those numbers change depending on the genre?"

--J.L. Powers

This is a sophisticated question, and to answer it thoroughly will require a sophisticated response, one which first takes a step back and educates you on the mechanics and realities of how book sales truly work.

To begin with, one must know precisely what they speak of when they say "copies sold." That term is used too loosely, often by authors who don't truly know what it means, and as a result, publishing professionals are skeptical of any declaration of how many copies a book sold until they've have a chance to review all of the information for themselves. To accurately gauge book sales, the publishing professional needs to actually know four factors: 1) the number of copies printed; 2) the number of copies shipped; 3) the number of copies returned; and 4) the format of the book. For example, a publisher can print 100,000 copies of a book, but might only get bookstore orders for 10,000 copies, and thus only actually ship 10,000 copies. This would leave 90,000 copies sitting in the warehouse, and would be a

disastrous (and extreme) scenario for a book publisher. A more likely scenario is that a publisher prints 15,000 copies and ships 10,000 of them to start. Thus, to begin with, we have the (important) difference between copies *printed* and copies actually *shipped*.

Further complicating matters, bookstores retain the right to return unsold copies of books to publishers, and these “returns” start to trickle back within a few months after a book ships. (Nearly every book suffers from returns, and the average return rate for a book is approximately 25%. This is why publishers will hold back money due you at royalty time, as a “reserve against returns.”) Within 6 to 12 months of a book’s shipping, most returns will have come in, so it usually takes at least 9 months from the time a book is published to know how many copies the book “netted.” If a publisher prints 15,000 copies of a book and ships 10,000 copies, and six months later 8,000 copies are returned, then that book has only netted 2,000 copies. That is the real number. In this scenario, an author might unknowingly boast that his book sold 15,000 copies (based on the print run) or 10,000 copies (based on the copies shipped), but in reality, after returns, his book has only “sold” 2,000 copies. It is all about the net.

Finally, to complete the picture, a publishing professional must also know the format of the book. A book might be published as a \$50 coffee table book, or a \$25 hardcover, or a \$14 trade paperback, or a \$7 mass market. If a book sold 2,000 copies at \$50 or at \$7, that makes a huge difference. 30,000 copies sold of a hardcover, for example, could be a huge success for a publisher, while 30,000 copies

sold of a mass market edition might amount to a huge loss. So getting a complete picture of what a book truly “sold” is all about the net *and* the format.

Additionally, many books are published in multiple editions—often first as a hardcover, then a year later as a paperback—and it may be that a book only sold only 2,000 hardcover copies, but later sold 60,000 trade paperbacks. So to get an accurate picture of how many copies any book “sold,” one must tally up and take into account *all* of the editions of that book.

Now that you know what it means to accurately talk about how many copies a book truly “sold” from a publishing professional’s perspective, let’s look at some actual numbers.

We would all love to have that magic number, to know that, for example, 14,000 copies is the number you need to assure success and a life of future book deals. It is only natural that any author, after being published, would want to know how many copies he or she would need to sell in order to be considered a success. Yet if you ask your editor or agent this question, it is quite likely that they will hesitate in giving you a response. It is easy to gauge if a book is a huge failure, selling only 100 copies, or if it is a huge success, selling 100,000 hardcovers—but what if it falls into that gray area? What if it sells 7,000 hardcovers? Or 11,000 trade paperbacks? Indeed, this is one of the hardest questions for any publishing professional to answer. Most won’t even try to answer it, for fear of quoting a wrong number, or simply because even they don’t know how. That said, let me attempt to give you an answer here.

The most important factor in considering whether a book is a success is comparing the size of the advance to the number of copies sold. If a publisher paid a

\$3,000 advance and netted 10,000 hardcovers, then that book was a success. If a publisher paid a \$200,000 advance for that same book, then those same number of copies amount to a failure.

Interestingly, for this very reason, some agents could argue that it is best *not* to negotiate too large of an advance for an author, thus assuring that the author will always be profitable for their publisher and will thus publish as many books as possible—and thus have more chances to land a major hit. These agents would reason that the author will make up the money on the backend, through royalties. Other agents could argue that what is most important is landing the largest advance possible—whether or not their author lands a subsequent book deal—since the majority of books won't earn back their advance anyway.

All of this still begs the question: if you sold 7,000 hardcovers or 11,000 trade paperbacks and have to go out and find a new publisher for a subsequent book, would that sales record be sufficient to impress? What is the actual number of copies that will assure success? Here are some real numbers:

Most debut literary story collections net approximately 2,000 hardcover copies. Most literary first novels net between 3,000 and 7,000 hardcover copies. Most commercial first novels net between 5,000 and 10,000 hardcover copies. Non-fiction is genre specific, so one would have to take into account whether one were dealing with relationships, parenting, dieting, health, business, history, memoir—or whatever the genre—before one could offer approximations. That said, netting at least 20,000 hardcovers in any genre will usually be enough to make any publisher pay serious attention to your next book.

This is not to say that if one sold only 2,500 hardcover copies of a literary first novel that he is a dismal failure, or that if one sold 7,500 hardcovers of a literary first novel that he is guaranteed a subsequent book deal. Again, publishers will look at the whole picture when making a decision, including the number of copies you sold relative to the publisher and to the advance paid. If you sold 7,500 hardcovers after a \$200,000 marketing campaign, it will not bode well; and if you netted 2,500 hardcovers after being published by a tiny press with no reviews or publicity, then that may bode well.

To further complicate matters, the concept and quality of the writing at hand might just make all of these numbers irrelevant. If a publisher falls in love with your new concept, he may very well want to buy your next book, even if your previous book sold miserably. I recall a situation where I had an author who didn't earn back his \$15,000 advance with one publisher, yet I sold his new proposal to a new publisher for a \$200,000 advance because they loved the new concept so much. Conversely, you can sell a ton of copies and not land a subsequent book deal if no one likes your new concept, or if they don't feel your writing is of the quality that it was in the past. I have seen situations like these, as well.

Obviously, if you are selling 100,000 hardcovers, you have little to worry about. Excluding that, there really is no magic number that will guarantee you a life of successful publishing. As I discuss at length in my book [How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent](#), there will be always be so many factors taken into account, in addition to past sales figures, when trying to land a new book deal, including timing, the current market, and personal, subjective taste. Unfortunately, even selling well will

not necessarily assure you a solid future in this precarious business; yet the good news is that selling poorly will not necessarily seal your fate either.

The most important thing for you, as an author, is to try not to pay attention to any of this, to keep writing, to keep querying, and to never, ever give up—whether it's after one book, or after ten.

## Will being published by a small press help my career?

"I'm curious how small-press published books are viewed by industry professionals. My book was repped by a top agent but didn't sell. Now I'm at a crossroads: seek out a small/mid-size press or scrap the book. I've heard from more than one source that publishers and bookstores will look only at the number of books sold without taking into consideration the size of the press. I guess the larger question is, is a small/mid-size press really a good stepping stone? My goal is to have a thriving career as a mystery author. Thank you."

--Anonymous

The first thing you must know is that the term “small press” can mean anything, and that there is a world of difference between one small press and another. Anyone can launch a “small press” from their living room by publishing one or two titles, giving them tiny print runs, and sending them out into the world with little or no distribution or review coverage. With a fancy website, a nice logo, and some key listings in small press directories, this “small press” can appear, at first glance, to be as much of a small press as one that has genuinely published dozens of titles over many years.

If you are talking about one of the legitimate and prestigious small/mid-size presses, such as Algonquin, Overlook, Coffee House, Graywolf, Soho, or Pegasus (to name a few), then yes, being published by them can certainly make a major

difference in your career—indeed, a publication with any of these can lead to more review coverage, better distribution and better sales than with a major publisher. The excellent small/mid-size presses tend to put a lot of time and attention into each and every title, and sometimes this can pay off. I recall a situation about ten years ago when I represented an author who had two books published at nearly the same time, one with a prestigious small press, the other with a major publisher. The small press publication sold triple the copies and garnered far more review attention.

That said, I have encountered many authors who have a fantasy that, if their book does not find a major publisher, they can always turn to a small press. Not true. While there are hundreds if not thousands of “small presses” out there, there are actually very few prestigious and influential small/mid-size presses. These few small presses tend to receive as many submissions as the major publishers, and it has been my experience that they are at least as selective as the major publishers, and sometimes even more so. I recall many submissions where a prestigious small press rejected a book, only to have a major publisher acquire it.

If you are considering being published by a small press, and it is not one of the few prestigious small presses, then in most cases I would say, don’t do it. Instead, put your manuscript in a drawer and write another book. If you sell subsequent books to major houses, then your unpublished manuscripts can be valuable, as your new publisher may want to acquire them all at some point down the road. I recall an instance where an author I represented could not land several novels, and his three unpublished novels sat in his drawer for ten years. When I finally got him his big break with a major house, that house wanted to take all of his novels, and he

suddenly found himself with four advances and four books coming out in quick succession. In this case, it was better for him to have these rights free when the time came than to have had them tied up by an ineffectual press.

Finally, keep in mind that many of the prestigious small presses won't consider your manuscript unless it is submitted by an agent—or at the very least, they won't take it as seriously. So it is really best to focus your energy on writing the best book you can, and then finding an agent. A good agent will know which small presses to keep in mind, and when to include them in a submission.

### Can self-publishing damage your career?

“More than a few writers are turning to POD publishing after their agent cannot sell their book, or after they can't get an agent to rep their book. When they go to sell the next book, will this POD or self publishing work against them if they end up selling only a few thousand books? Is it better to do an ebook or think of another way to get their material before their readers that doesn't generate an ISBN number?”

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of “Writers on Writing,” a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California.

Understandably, authors worry that self-publishing their book with a print on demand (POD) service could end up hurting them in the long run. They worry that an assigned ISBN could track their book's sales, and that if sales are weak, a future publisher will reject future books based on their track record.

But there is nothing to fear. Publishers are sophisticated enough to differentiate whether an author's prior books sold poorly as a result of being published in a POD format or as a result of being published by a major publisher. If an author's books were published by a major publisher and sold poorly, then yes, this would be a major problem for a future acquiring editor. But if the poor sales were the result of a POD

edition, then all is forgiven, and the author is treated as if he had never been published at all. And if the sales were strong, the POD edition can become an asset.

This has been my experience as a literary agent. I also discussed this question with an editor at a major publishing house, and he concurred.

This topic also begs the broader question: whether to self-publish at all. Keep in mind that the majority of authors who self-publish will find that just because they “published” their book and perhaps even built a website, it doesn’t necessarily mean the masses have shown up to buy it, or that they’ve been able to draw review attention. I would guess that most self-published books sell but a few dozen copies to family and friends, and sadly, never lead to a book deal.

If you want to self-publish merely for personal satisfaction, or to share your book with family and friends, then by all means, do it. But if you are embarking on this path solely for commercial reasons—as a way to land a book deal with a major publisher—then I would say only do it if you realize that 1) the chances of this happening are remote; and 2) you are going to have to put a huge amount of time and effort into bringing traffic, attention and publicity to your book online. If you have 100,000 followers of Twitter, or a video with 500,000 views on youtube, or an e-zine with 100,000 subscribers, then you may be a good candidate for self-publishing. If you can manage to sell 5,000 or 10,000 copies on your own, if you can manage to land one or two major reviews in established venues, you may be able to defy the odds and land an agent or publisher. Online, it’s all about what you bring to the table and how hard you are willing to work. Which is, in fact, good training for being published by a major publisher. Successful traditionally-published books also

have in common authors who bring their own resources to the table, and who push their own books relentlessly over extended periods of time.

Ultimately, the same factors that affect a traditionally-published book's success will also affect the success of a self-published book: does your book have a unique concept? Does it have competition? Is there a large market for the genre? Do you have the means to reach out effectively to the market that needs to know about it? How strong are your writing skills, and how well-written is your book?

If you have something important to say and say it well, your book will eventually find its audience. If not, technology can never replace quality.

## Is there a market for literary fiction set in a country outside of the United States?

**Question: Is there a market for literary fiction set in a country outside of the United States (for example, India)?**

There is always a market for great fiction (and great books, in general), regardless of whether they are set in or outside of the United States (as has been proved by many recent bestsellers set in other countries). There is no reason why your novel's being set in another country (for example, India) should be a deterrent to its sale, or should make it harder for you to land a literary agent.

As an agent, I myself was never biased against a particular work because of its being set in another country. Of much greater importance to me was the strength of the writing, the depth of the characters, the richness of the plot, the authenticity of the dialogue. If all of these (and other) elements were there, then the country was of no consequence. What is important, however, is that, artistically, the country (or the setting, in general) be authentically inherent to the other elements, and not forced onto the work simply for the sake of it.

That said, there have certainly been times in my career when I've heard back from an editor that he or she felt that a particular manuscript was too inherent to a particular country to be successful in the U.S., or heard back from a European

publisher that a particular manuscript was too inherent to the U.S. to be successful in Europe. So there may be exceptions, depending of course on the work. But overall, I believe that universal truths will be recognized across countries and across continents: love, revenge, ambition, resolution, conflict...if an author taps into the essence of humanity in any given work, it will surely be embraced worldwide.

So my advice is to write what you know, and to focus on creating the best possible work. Once you achieve that, the setting should not be an issue.

## Can I be represented by two literary agents?

**Question: How unusual is it to have two agents? I have one novel signed with a British agent now, and they are looking at my second book. IF they decide it's not for them, I'll look elsewhere, of course. Just wondered how uncommon that would be?**

The standard response would be to tell you that, in the majority of cases, literary agents will only work with an author on an exclusive basis. From an agent's perspective, there are many (justifiable) reasons for this, including the fact that there are option and non-compete clauses built into publishing agreements, and that if another agent were to represent other works by the same author, the legalities could become infinitely complex. There are subsidiary rights issues, too. The shaping of the author's career also becomes a problem, since agents often like to help "build" an author in a certain direction—and if another agent were involved, this could become impossible. There is also the simple financial fact that it can take years of hard work to build an author's career, and one agent would not want to devote so much effort only to see another agent reap the benefits. And finally, the exclusive agent-author relationship is standard industry etiquette, and thus a publisher, knowing that an author is represented by one agent, would be quite surprised to receive a work by that same author submitted simultaneously by a different agent—and would probably not even know how to respond.

That said, as with everything in book publishing, this can become more complex, and the issue is not always so black and white. For me to give you a thorough response, I would have to take into account many factors. The answer will ultimately vary in each case, depending on the agent, the author, the publisher, and the work(s) in question. For example, it would be very unusual (if not impossible) for a novelist to have two different literary agents representing two different novels of his simultaneously. However, what if a novelist decides he wants to write non-fiction for his next book? And his agent only represents fiction? Will that agent be OK with his looking for a separate agent to handle his non-fiction?

There is certainly more leeway in the scenario of an author switching from fiction to non-fiction, and some agents will be fine with that, and will even recommend agents and/or give the author their blessing. Other agents, though, will not. If an agent is part of a bigger agency, he will, if possible, want to keep the author in-house at the agency, and have another agent in his company represent the non-fiction (which is usually fine). However, if his colleague doesn't want to represent the non-fiction (as is often the case), then the agent may not want his author searching elsewhere for an agent to represent the non-fiction. Agents can be territorial, and they may become worried that if their novelist finds another agent to represent his non-fiction, then their client may end up, in the long run, switching to that other agency for his fiction, too. They also will not want their novelist devoting years to writing non-fiction, which are years which could have been spent continuing to write fiction (and vice versa with non-fiction versus fiction).

As an author, if you find yourself in a position where you are switching genres and must decide whether you want to have this conversation with your agent and look for a second (simultaneous) agent, you should take into account many factors. For example, if you are a novelist, and your agent has represented you for many years, and has landed you several deals for hundreds of thousands of dollars, is it really worth it to jeopardize the relationship in order to go out and find another agency to represent a one-time non-fiction concept? Conversely, if you are a novelist and have been with your agent for years and he has not landed you any deals, and you now want to make a true, lifelong career switch to non-fiction, then it may make more sense for you to find a non-fiction agent, whatever the price.

Just know that, whatever you decide, with most agents, the notion of your being represented simultaneously by another agency will usually strain the relationship. Whether it's worth it is a decision only you can make.

## **Should I finish the manuscript of my novel before submitting to agents?**

**Question:** I am currently working on a novel that I believe is very unique in the murder/mystery genre. My work is about 10,000 words currently, headed for about 110,000-120,000. Would an agent take me on at this stage of the game or do I need a completed work?

A good question. If you've written a novel, never query an agent unless your manuscript is finished and in its absolute final draft. Ideally, this final draft has not only been revised dozens of times over several months, but has also taken into account feedback from trusted, impartial readers. Your querying an agent should not be viewed as an opportunity to enter into a back and forth. Is not a dialogue: it is a one way conversation. You are requesting representation and he is responding Yes or No.

In rare cases an agent may be intrigued enough by your work to request a revision. But in the vast majority of cases, this will not happen. If an agent does not like your work, he will not ask you to revise, or be willing to read another draft. Thus your approach is your one and only shot, and it must represent the final, best work you have to offer.

That said, there are always exceptions. There have been instances in my career when I've sold a partial fiction manuscript for a very significant advance. In such cases, though, these partials will often comprise at least 200 or 300 pages, include a detailed synopsis for the remainder of the book, and will have been written by

authors who have already published several novels with major houses. Even then, I do not advise you stopping at page 200 or 300 for a submission's sake. If you can write 300 pages, you can write 400, and it's always best to have the finished manuscript in hand beforehand.

When it comes to non-fiction, though, the requirements are different: you always approach with an unfinished work. The vast majority of non-fiction is sold based upon a professional non-fiction book proposal, which comprises but one or two sample chapters and rarely exceeds 40 or 50 pages. (I discuss this topic at length in my book [\*How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent\*](#).) If you are unable to find representation, or if your agent is unable to land you a deal, then you would have wasted your time writing the entire manuscript in advance. But just because you are dealing with 40 or 50 pages, don't think a first draft will suffice: as with fiction, these pages must be in the best possible shape.

This all points to a broader issue. In general, there is a stark difference in the publishing industry between fiction and non-fiction: many editors, for example, are only allowed by their publisher to acquire either fiction or non-fiction, and many publishers and imprints will publish either fiction or non-fiction. Editors of non-fiction tend to lunch with agents of non-fiction, and the same holds true with fiction. There are circles within circles in the publishing industry. You, as the author, must realize there is a stark divide, and never assume that the same rules that apply to fiction also apply to non-fiction. The more you pay attention to the detailed, specific rules which apply to each genre, the greater the likelihood of your landing a deal.

## Do agents really read the first five pages? Or just the first five sentences?

**Question:** I have purchased your book, *The First Five Pages*, and found it to be very valuable. I wonder, however, how likely it is that an over-worked literary agent (or editor) would have the time to read those first five pages. I would like to know what you think of making the first five sentences (or paragraphs, if need be) as vital and as impossible to ignore as those five pages?

This is a good question and shows that you are thinking in the right way, since you already realize that an author does not have the luxury of time or space in catching an agent's or editor's attention. Ten years ago, I wrote in the introduction of my book, *The First Five Pages*, that the title should have really been *The First Five Sentences*, since most agents will make a determination based upon these. This still holds true. An experienced literary agent can, in most cases, determine an author's writing ability within just a few sentences. Agents *have* to: if they don't have this ability, there is simply no way they will be able to survive, to sift through the thousands of manuscripts that cross their desk every year.

So, yes, it is vital that your first five sentences be as well written as your first five pages. But don't let this become an excuse to labor over the first five sentences (and the first five pages) and then let the rest of your manuscript fall apart. My point all throughout *The First Five Pages* was never for an author to merely labor over the first

five pages, but rather that these first five pages serve as a microcosm for the rest of the book: if, for example, you overuse adjectives and adverbs in the opening pages, then you likely overuse them throughout the rest of your manuscript. The point was to take a step back, examine and revise your first five pages intensively, then take what you've learned and apply this throughout the rest of your work. The most important lesson you will walk away with is the one of craftsmanship: if you spend an entire month on your opening page, an entire week on your opening paragraph, this will change your work ethic and raise your standards dramatically. You can then apply these standards throughout the rest of your manuscript.

*That* is the value of your first five pages.

## What do you look for in a logline?

**Question: Authors read about the need for a condensed hook, a one or two sentence summary of a novel's premise that will inspire an interested party to read more. What do you look for in a hook? What should an author incorporate in a hook?**

This is a great question, and I devote many pages to discussing this in my free e-book, [\*How to Write a Great Query Letter\*](#). The short answer:

It is important for an author to prepare a logline (sometimes referred to as a “tagline” or as “a one (or two) sentence summary”), because some agents will ask for it, because it will help you condense your query letter, and perhaps most importantly, because the act of condensing your 300 or 400 page work to a mere one or two sentences is a pivotal exercise for every author. The process will force you to examine your work in a whole new light and to ask yourself hard questions about what it is really about. It will also help you understand your work from the perspective of those who will have to market it, whether it is an agent, editor, sales rep or bookseller. And it will force you, creatively, to face the very essence of what your work is about.

The question authors most fear is, “What is your work about?” When confronted with such a question, we usually either find ourselves at a loss for words, or find ourselves spending ten minutes poorly explaining our work. It is the rare author who can summarize his own work instantly, without blinking, in a pithy

manner, with eloquence and brevity. This should be your goal. If you can get to the point where you can achieve this verbally, in a social situation, then you will have reached the point where you can achieve this on the page. Writing, after all, is merely thought applied to paper.

From an agent's perspective, specificity is all. This shouldn't be too surprising, because all good writing is specific. As I discuss at length in my book, location, time period and comparison are three vital tools that will help you get there. You can write "My novel is set in America," or be more specific and write, "My novel is set in New York," or go further, "My novel is set in East Harlem." The more specific you get, the stronger the imagery. You could write, "My novel takes place over a short period of time," or "My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842." 1776. 1812. 1945. McMurdo Station, Antarctica. Mobile, Alabama. Reykjavik, Iceland. Dates, locations and time frames can tell us so much, and with little space. A relevant comparison to a successful book in your genre will help complete the picture, and do so in few words.

As you work on your logline, it may even spur you to reconsider revising your work itself. In this way, we begin to see how the process of creating a logline can be far more than just a marketing endeavor.

### **"How do I find out what agent represents a novel in my genre?"**

This is an excellent question, and one I get asked often. There are many ways to go about this, and to do this research thoroughly, the right way, will take much time and effort. That said, here are three quick ways to help start your search:

- 1) Visit [www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com) and click “Deals.” Under “Browse deals” set the drop-down tab for Year to 2009 (also do this search for 2008 and 2007). Set the “categories” drop-down tab to the genre of your work (for example, “Fiction/Thriller”) and click Browse. I just tried it in the “Thriller” genre, and it returned 53 deals for 2009 and 116 more for 2008, totalling 169 reported deals for just the last year and a half. Scan through each and you will find the name of the agent who made the deal.
  
- 2) Visit [www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com) and click “Top Dealmakers.” Set the Dealmaker drop-down tab to “Agents” and set the Deals category to the genre of your work (for example, Fiction/Thriller). I just did it and it returned information on the top 100 agents who recently made deals in the genre—and even sorted them in order of the number of deals.
  
- 3) Visit <http://books.google.com/> and in the search tab type the key word “Acknowledgments,” and then (separately) type in the name of relevant authors and

books in your genre. It may bring up the acknowledgments pages of relevant books, and these may mention the names of the agents.

As I said, all of this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more ways to go about this (I discuss this topic at length in my book, [How to Land and Keep a Literary Agent](#)). Also keep in mind that, aside from the genre, there are many additional factors you must consider in order to properly evaluate whether an agent is the right one for your work.

## **Is my agent (even if fired) entitled to commission my option book?**

Hi Noah,

Great blog. I have a question unrelated to this post - after firing an agent, can she use the options clause in your publishing contract between you and your publisher to claim a commission on future works?

Thank you.

--Anonymous

This is a sophisticated question, and one which is rarely addressed.

For those of you who may not know, a standard publishing agreement contains an “option clause,” which gives your publisher the first and exclusive right to acquire the next book you write. The standard publishing agreement also contains an “agency clause” (for authors represented by agents) which assures your agent that he will receive his commission. The issue at hand is not the option clause itself: it would be quite unusual for an option clause to contain any language referencing the agent. The real issue is the agency clause: it is quite common for an agency clause to reference the author’s option book. This language usually states that if the publisher buys the author’s next book (the option book), then the agent will be entitled to commission that, too.

From the agent’s perspective, the agent is the one that introduced the author to the publisher, and thus if the author continues the relationship with that publisher

for a subsequent book, the agent should be entitled to commission that, too. This is relatively standard, and in many scenarios, this is justified: an agent can work for years to finally land an author a deal, and in some cases, once the author is all setup, the author will fire the agent in order to not have to pay him a commission on future works. Alternately, the author may fire the agent in order to switch to another agent. In such a scenario, the original agent may feel burned, and feel entitled to commission at least one more book between the author and the publisher. This language exists to enforce that.

But there are a number of reasons an author-agent relationship can fall apart during the months or years it takes to complete a book, and it's not always due to greed or a lack of loyalty on the author's part. In some cases, the author may be working in good faith with the agent, while the agent may, along the way, become unresponsive or unsupportive. Thus the author may very well feel entitled to fire the agent, and may feel that the agent should not be entitled to a commission on an option book.

In most cases, this is not an issue, since authors who are setup with a publisher are usually happy, especially if they continue this relationship for subsequent books, and they'll usually be grateful and want to continue have their agent represent them. And in most cases, agents, for their part, will continue to work hard, and continue to be eager to represent the author.

But if things do fall apart, and if it does become an issue, then legally, if the agency clause contains this language, then the agent does have a legal basis to receive that commission. In order to ensure he receives this commission, an agent may sue

the author and/or publisher. It can get very messy. This is why a few publishers, who don't want to get caught up in spats between authors and agents, will refuse to allow this language in agency clauses. Most publishers do, though, and it remains fairly standard.

Keep in mind that this language is fairly limited: it only entitles your agent to a commission if you sell your next book to the same publisher, and it only entitles them to commission that next option book (not subsequent books). Thus there are ways around it. For example, if your publisher rejects your next book and you sell it to a different publisher, then the agent cannot claim a commission. Or if your publisher rejects your option book, but then you write a different book and sell it to that same publisher, your agent cannot claim a commission on that either, since technically, it's not your option book (even though you remain with the same publisher).

Finally, keep in mind that you may also have signed a separate agency agreement directly with your agent, and that, too, may contain pertinent language. You need to check both to make sure you are completely free and clear. (Also read my post, “Can I fire my agent mid-submission?”)

**Do some agents give up if a manuscript doesn't sell in the first round of  
submissions?**

"Do most agents stay with a book until it finds a home, no matter how low the advances might be? I honestly don't care about the advance. I just want to get published. But I've heard some agents bow out if the book doesn't sell to someone in the first round of submissions. Is this true?"

Thanks!

Barbara

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of "Writers on Writing," a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California

This is another good question, and one which demands a thorough response. To begin with, one cannot offer a blanket answer on behalf of every agent in the industry: some agents will indeed give up after a few submissions, while others will work tirelessly for months or even years. It is very much agent specific, and manuscript specific.

It is also genre specific: certain genres allow for a higher number of submissions. For example, if your work is narrative non-fiction, there may be 30 or 40 (or more) potential editor submissions, while if your work is commercial fiction, that number may shrink to the vicinity of 20. There tend to be more imprints setup to acquire

non-fiction than fiction (particularly commercial fiction). But if your work is prescriptive non-fiction (such as popular psychology), there may be fewer potential imprints than for narrative non-fiction, and thus fewer potential submissions. If your work will be a trade paperback original, that, too, can limit the number of potential submissions, as fewer imprints publish trade paperback originals as do hardcovers and paperbacks. If your work is destined to be a mass market original, that will limit potential submissions even further. If your work is academic, that, too, will limit the playing field.

Thus a well-intentioned and hard-working agent may simply be unable to submit beyond a certain number of editors and may exhaust a submission quickly, depending on the genre. There are only a finite number of publishers, and if they all reject your work, then the agent cannot create options where there are none. So lack of success is not always the agent's fault: if the agent has exhausted all submissions methodically, he has still done his job well (assuming, of course, he has chosen the most appropriate editors within each publisher).

That said, the converse may be true: an agent might give up after only submitting your work to 5 or 10 editors, when he could have submitted to 40. Such an agent's motivation may be financial: it may be that he chooses his "A List," the 5 or 10 publishers he thinks might pay the biggest advance, and when they all pass, he assumes that the B or C Lists won't pay as much, and thus gives up. Or it may be that the agent is just easily discouraged, and that when 10 trusted colleagues tell him a book won't sell, he believes them and sees no point in trying further. Or it could be that the first 10 rejections all tell him of a directly competing project of which he was

unaware, and as a result he decides submitting further would be a waste of time. It may be that the agent is not as knowledgeable of the industry as he should be, and only knows 10 publishers, or only has contacts in those houses. Or it may be that the agent becomes unhappy with the author during the first round of submissions (if, for example, the author is pestering him) and uses the first round of rejections as an excuse to end the relationship. Or the agent may simply be lazy.

No matter what the reason or motivation, there is no excuse for an agent to give up and not exhaust a submission, submitting to every last possible player. If an agent commits to a manuscript, then he should see it through, should stay with it whether it's been rejected by 5 editors or by 45. He should stay with it whether it takes a week or a year, whether it sells for an advance of one million dollars or one thousand.

The majority of legitimate agents will indeed exhaust a submission. Sometimes a termination of a submission is initiated by an author: an agent may work in good faith for months while the author, impatient, may fire the agent. As a rule of thumb, most proposals on submission (if submitted thoroughly by a legitimate agent) will sell within a matter of 4 months. But there are always exceptions. I've sold one book in a submission that lasted two hours, and I've sold another after a submission that lasted 14 years.

Unfortunately, once you sign with an agent, you cannot control his methodology. What you can control is who you decide to sign with. As I've said many times, you must spend months researching potential agents before deciding who to approach and sign with. If you choose a legitimate agent who represents great authors and who has a track record of recent sales to major houses, then you will have little to worry

about. If you choose an agent who you know little about, or whose record is not as reliable, then you may have more cause for concern; in that case, make sure (as I've discussed before) that you have an out clause in your agency agreement, so that you can fire him if you are unsatisfied.

But even if you fire a bad agent, once he has already submitted your manuscript, it will be tarnished in the eyes of most new agents, who will likely not want to take it on. So while it's good that you'll at least be able to get free of the old agent, the damage (for that manuscript) is already done. You will likely have to give your new agent a new work and/or wait a few years until the editors who've rejected your first work have left the industry. So, again, choose carefully. Spending more time upfront on research will save you from worrying throughout the process.

**"Is it normal to have different agents for U.S. and international publication?"**

"I have a question regarding non-US agents. I've written a suspense/thriller novel, which earned honorable mention in a fairly prestigious UK competition. The novel is set in Wales, and I received a manuscript request from a London based agent.

I'm in the US, and plan on submitting queries to US agents. Is it normal, or even proper, to have different agents for US or International publication?"

Thanks,

Rick DeMille

As a rule of thumb, it is best to focus your search on finding an agent in the U.S., for several reasons. First and foremost, if you submit your book to foreign publishers, whether directly or via an international agent, the first question they will ask is who is publishing it in the U.S. When you tell them there is no U.S. publisher, then in most cases they will either lose interest, or tell you to come back to them once you have a U.S. publisher, or make you an offer which is lower than it may have been otherwise.

There are other reasons to find a U.S. agent first. When a U.S. agent shops your book to U.S. publishers, he needs every option at his disposal in order to make a sale. Landing a book deal is not easy, even for an agent, and if an agent is forced to shop around a book in which world rights are not available, that could end up

making the difference in his being able to place it at all. It may end up that a U.S. publisher likes your book, but is somewhat on the fence, and having the assurance of world rights makes the difference, and enables them to make an offer. Alternately, the advance that a U.S. publisher offers might be significantly smaller if world rights are not included as part of the deal. For example, a publisher might offer you an advance of \$50,000 for U.S. rights only, or \$75,000 for world rights. If you have already engaged one or more international agents to shop your book in their territories, then you will not be able to offer those rights to a U.S. publisher. U.S. publishers like to engage their own international co-agents, and will not want to use yours. That is not to say that in every instance you will give a US publisher world rights—but you do want to all have options at your disposal.

Additionally, once a U.S. agent sells your book to a U.S. publisher, if he retains the world rights, the first thing he will do is put your book into the hands of all of the international co-agents he has relationships with. If you have already committed your book to other international agents, it will cause a problem with your U.S. agent.

All of this to say that you should not query international agents as the first step towards getting published. I still recommend your approaching U.S. agents first, and, of course, that your U.S. agent approaches U.S. publishers first.

If your U.S. agent shops your book to U.S. publishers and it doesn't sell, then, at that point, you might want to consider shopping it in other countries. In that case, your U.S. agent may be willing to engage one or more of his co-agents in other countries to try to shop them. That, though, would be fairly unusual. As I said, making foreign deals without a U.S. deal already in place is not an easy sell, because

the first question asked will be who is publishing in the U.S. That said, there have been some rare cases where a book did not sell in the U.S., but then landed some foreign sales, and then the agent came back to the U.S. with the momentum and made a deal here. That, though, is very unusual.

Of course, if your novel is set in a particular location overseas, for example London, then I could understand how you might want to query UK agents directly, and I could see the temptation to have it shopped in the UK first. Still, though, I would hold off and wait to see what happens in the US first. In your case, if you are unable to find a US agent, and have exhausted all possible submissions, then, in that case, you have nothing to lose by following up and submitting your manuscript to the UK agent who has already contacted you directly.

Along these lines, for you authors who are self published and have had foreign publishers approach you directly, possibly as a result of your sales on Kindle, even in that case, I wouldn't necessarily recommend entering into a book deal with foreign publishers directly. If a publisher in a particular country approaches you with interest in your book, then chances are that there are other publishers in that same country who may also be interested in your book. Your book should be shopped thoroughly in that country, as opposed to taking the first offer that comes your way.

Additionally, and more importantly, it would be better for you to use the international interest in your book as a selling point to help convince US publishers to publish it in the US. As I said, it is not easy to land a book deal, and if you can prove to a US publisher that several international publishers are already interested, then that might make a difference.



## **Is it detrimental to have your book published as a trade paperback original?**

"Dear Mr. Lukeman,

Thanks again for creating your blog, and for generously taking our questions. I have a question (which you've probably been asked before) regarding hardcover vs. paperback. My debut collection of stories will be coming out with Ecco/HarperCollins, and most likely they'll do it in paperback (they'll also be publishing my novel, which is still in progress). I knew going into the deal that they were going to publish the stories in paper, but lately I'm having the anxiety that it won't be given the same kind of attention that most debut collections (in hardcover) get (reviews, award consideration, etc.). Most of my writer friends who've written debut collections had their books come out in hardcover, and were reviewed in the major venues, and went on to a paperback release. I worry that I won't have the same opportunities. I know these things can't be predicted, so I guess rather than a question, I'd like to know your thoughts on this, if perhaps I should have gone with a publisher who would've committed to a hardcover. I'm thrilled to be with Ecco--they were at the top of my list--but as my publication date gets closer, I'm becoming less certain about the format I've signed on to. I appreciate your response and advice. Thanks so much, and Happy New Year.

--Brin Londo (timberlondo@yahoo.com)"

This is a very sophisticated question, and there is no right or wrong answer. In fact, whether to publish in hardcover or paperback is always a matter of heated debate even among publishing veterans. It is by no means a science, and anyone who says they have all the answers is wrong. That said, let me at least clarify what the issues are, and the pros and cons of both.

On the one hand, one could argue that it is always better to be published in hardcover first, for a number of reasons. First of all, there is the obvious reason that you stand to earn more money in hardcover royalties than in paperback. If the typical hardcover is \$25, and your royalties escalate to 15%, you can end up making \$3.75 or more per book sold. If the typical trade paperback is priced at \$15, and you are making a 7.5% royalty, then you are making just over \$1 per book.

And then, of course, there is the prestige and review factor. Many authors and publishers will argue that books published in hardcover are much more likely to get reviewed, and to get more reviews. Many also feel that a hardcover is more prestigious.

Finally, one could also argue that being published in hardcover gives your book two lives, two chances to make it: once in hardcover, and then again, a year later, in paperback. (As opposed to a paperback original, which only has one chance to make it.) One could argue that these two lives are crucial in making a book, since sometimes a book is published at a wrong time, whereas a year later the climate may be just perfect for a great reception.

There is some validity to all of these arguments, and one can't discount them. If your book becomes a true hit, and it sells for years in hardcover, then you certainly will stand to make much more money in royalties, for one. Look for example, at a book like *THE HELP*. That book has sold astronomically well in hardcover. If it had been published as a paperback original, the author and publisher would not have made nearly as much as they are making now. One could also argue that if it had been published as a paperback original, then it would not have received the critical reviews it needed to become the bestseller that it did.

All of that said, one can also make convincing arguments to publish a book as a trade paperback original. One could argue that publishing in hardcover can sometimes kill the crucial momentum that an author, particularly a first-time author, needs to build a readership. This argument can especially be made with certain types of books, and certain genres. For example, if the potential readership for a book is younger, and cannot afford \$25 as easily as \$15, then a publisher may take that into consideration and thus publish as a trade paperback original. Certain genres, as a whole, tend to do better in trade paperback than they do in hardcover, and that might also affect a publisher's decision. If, for example, they feel that your first story collection, or novel, is targeted towards a 20-something readership, that might tip the scales in their decision to publish as a trade paperback original.

Another argument for a trade paperback original is that sometimes a book is published in hardcover, and still gets few or no reviews. On top of that, the sales can be dismal – so dismal that the publisher won't even publish a paperback edition a year later. In that case, you are left with a hardcover publication that didn't get you

anywhere. You could argue that, if the book had been published initially as a trade paperback original, it would have sold many more copies, and perhaps gained momentum, and perhaps crossed a tipping point – one which it will, in that case, never have a chance to cross.

The only thing harder to do than landing a book deal for a first time novelist is landing a book deal for a novelist already published to a bad track record. In many ways, it is easier to land a book deal for someone who has never been published, and who has no track record in the system. Once you are published to a poor track record, your numbers are permanently in the system, and it is extremely difficult to convince publishers to publish subsequent books. So another argument for publishing as a trade paperback original is that you don't take the risk of publishing in hardcover to dismal sales, and ruining your track record for subsequent books. In other words, publishing as a trade paperback original just may make a publisher more inclined to buy your subsequent books. It is more of a long-term approach, looking at your career in the big picture.

As far as the review issue is concerned, no one can say for certain that being published in hardcover will necessarily result in more reviews than being published as a trade paperback original. I have seen some books published in hardcover that received no reviews whatsoever (when they should have received many) and I've seen other books published as trade paperback originals that received many reviews. It's true that, as a rule of thumb, hardcovers tend to receive, on average, more reviews than trade paperback originals, but it really is uneven and based on the book.

So I wouldn't necessarily feel that you are jeopardizing your chance for reviews simply because it is a trade paperback original.

A more important factor than the format of the book in getting reviews is the prestige of the publisher and imprint. If a hardcover is being published by a very commercial publisher who is not critically well respected, it may not receive any reviews, whereas if a trade paperback original is being published by a prestigious press, it will more likely get review attention. In your case, Ecco is a prestigious imprint, and I'm sure that major review outlets will pay attention to your book, regardless of the format.

In your case, keep in mind that it is not easy to land a book deal for a story collection, especially with a prestigious publisher. If you had many publishers bidding on your book and several offers to choose from, then in that case, you certainly could have debated whether to go for a hardcover or paperback publication. It all depends on what your bidding situation was, and how thorough a job your agent did in shopping it around. But if your agent shopped it thoroughly and every other publisher passed, then you should consider yourself very fortunate to have landed a deal at all.

One final issue: in the long run, it is not helpful for you to compare yourself to fellow authors. There will always be authors who land bigger advances than you, receive more reviews, win more awards, and sell more books. Comparing yourself to others will ultimately make you unhappy. Just compare yourself to yourself. Focus on what you do, and make each book the best it can be, and challenge yourself to make each book better, and everything will fall into place.

## **Is editor turnaround so high that you can re-submit in just a few years?**

"Is the editor turnaround really so high that it only takes a few years for those who rejected your work to leave the industry?"

--Colin

Yes. The good news for unpublished authors is that it is true that editor turnover is so high that it is quite likely that, three years from now, most editors in their current positions won't be there anymore. Some will become agents; some will become freelance editors; some will leave the industry altogether. And the ones who remain will likely, three years from now, be working at a different imprint or publisher. The editor who, three years from now, is still working at the same imprint is increasingly a rarity. I'd say that will be the case for perhaps only 20% of editors on any given submission list.

It has always been this way. Book publishing is a high burn-out industry, and it offers little compensation for a very high workload. Many people who enter will leave it within a few years. I still have submission lists from books I submitted in 1996: when I look back on them now, not a single editor remains in the same imprint (many of which folded), and 90% of them have left the industry.

So the good news for unpublished authors is that, if editors reject your manuscript, then if you are willing to wait two or three years, you will have a (mostly) clean slate to try again.

But in the big picture, I advise that when you finish writing one manuscript, you immediately turn to writing another. Don't wait. The more books you have out there, the better your chances. Ultimately, it's better to rely on the submission of multiple books over three years than it is for you to just sit there and wait three years to re-submit the same book.

This is one of the (many) reasons why I say that, when setting out to get published, one should prepare oneself for a marathon, not a sprint. Quite often, what makes the difference between authors who get published and those who don't is simply the number of years they were willing to hang in there. Perseverance is everything.

### **“Should I pay a fee to have my work published?”**

“Have you heard of Tate Publishing? Do you think they are a reputable publisher? I submitted a children's book series and they said they wanted to publish it and sent out a contract. I am just worried because I have seen things on the internet saying that they aren't reputable and I am worried about risking the \$4000 they ask for as a retainer fee. They said the \$4000 is refundable once 1000 copies sell.”

--Anonymous

Never pay a fee to a publisher—or anyone—to publish your work. Unfortunately, there are many companies and services and “publishers” out there that prey on unpublished authors and are merely out to make a profit. They will entice authors to publish in all sorts of ways. Sometimes they will request an upfront fee; sometimes they will claim they have no fees, yet later present you with hidden fees, such as “editorial” or “reading” fees; sometimes they will claim they have no fees whatsoever, yet request you buy a hundred copies of your work at a high price; sometimes they will pretend to be running a contest or competition, and request an entry fee for that contest. Later, they will claim you are a winner, and request you buy multiple copies of your published book. Legitimate publishers and literary agents will never charge any upfront fees.

I always advise authors to never pay any upfront fees to publishers, reading or editorial services, or literary agents who charge them. This is especially true in this new day and age, where authors who wish to self-publish can easily use print on demand (POD) services like CreateSpace or Lightning Source. POD services are not masking themselves as publishers. They let you know upfront that they are just printing and distribution services. With POD services, you will pay a small, one-time setup fee, and then have control of your title's pricing and receive royalties from the first copy sold. This is not to say I advocate every author go the POD route—but rather that if you wish to self-publish, this is a much better route than paying some “publisher” an exorbitant fee upfront.

Keep in mind, too, that most authors going the self-publishing route tend to earn more money on sales from ebooks than from their paperback POD editions. In many cases, the income earned from paperback sales can be just 10 or 20% of what is earned on the ebook sales--especially in popular genres like commercial fiction. And with ebooks, there are no setup fees, especially if you can design your own jacket and convert your own file. Thus, depending on your genre, it may end up costing less time and money to focus on your ebook edition instead of the POD.

## **"Should I pay to have my work published?"**

Mr. Lukeman, A small but seemingly genuine publisher has accepted my mss with 100 poems which I have on a website with a large subscription list. The publisher wants the whole payment to commence. I thought payments were made in stages, proof reading, editing, printing etc. I feel the sum is reasonable 1K but now read that one should not pay all upfront. I wonder if you could kindly guide me on this. I am not really interested in making a lot of money but do want a book that is well advertised which is part of their package.

--Anonymous

Per my previous posts, I would never advise any author to pay to have their work published. Unfortunately, there are a lot of self-publishing services and vanity presses that take advantage of authors. Stay clear of them. If you are really set on self-publishing a physical edition of your work, you can use on-demand services, such as Lulu or CreateSpace, which charge only a low, basic setup fee, and which don't pretend to be bonafide publishers.

### **"Can I self-publish my ebook while pursuing a print deal?"**

"I've recently undergone a mentorship with a well-respected Australian writer and critic. We worked on the manuscript for my first novel and the final draft is concise, edited and ready for publishing. It is now being considered by Penguin Books. I am feeling somewhat frustrated because I want people to be reading it now, particularly those in the US as it is relevant to elections. If I was to publish direct with Kindle in order to get it out there and circulating, would this lessen my chances of landing a traditional publishing deal? What are publishing houses' views on authors who self-publish their works digitally while pursuing a publishing deal?"

--Anonymous

If you have representation by a legitimate U.S. agent who is aggressively shopping your work, then that submission process should typically (not always) play out within 8-12 weeks (depending on the length of your manuscript and whether it's fiction or non-fiction), and thus I would not self-publish in that scenario--I would wait 8 or 12 weeks and see what happens first. Because it's possible an editor might look you up on Amazon and find that exact title he is considering, and see that it has no (or bad) reviews and no sales, and it might give him pause.

If the submission is dead, though, then by all means, you have little to lose and a lot to potentially gain by self-publishing.

You always have the option of self-publishing under a pseudonym, too, to protect you--especially if it's fiction. You can even change the title temporarily. So hypothetically they wouldn't even make the connection to your work, and you can test both waters.

But again, if you are actively in the midst of seeking a print deal, then I would wait--assuming you are being shopped thoroughly by an agent.

Along these lines, you can also self publish while seeking an agent. Again, you might take a chance if the agent browses Amazon, but you can protect yourself with a name and title change. And if your agent search is not going well but your sales are, then you might just decide to keep things as they are.

### **"My agent is not responding. What should I do?"**

"Dear Mr. Lukeman, I've read three of your books and you've been an amazing inspiration. Thank you for all your work in adding to the writing community. I have a question - actually more of a worry. I was recently signed on by a new literary agent in a small agency. I was so excited to have landed an agent after a year of sending out over thirty queries that I signed the contract (after showing it to two lawyer friends who thought it was a standard contract). The agent is new, but she has over twenty years editorial experience in publishing and I know that she's in "acquire new clients" mode at the moment. But I've heard nothing from her since I signed the contract three weeks ago and she said she'd read my manuscript asap and help me polish it a bit more (minor changes) to get it ready for submissions. I sent her a friendly email ten days ago and no response. I know she's busy and I'm totally not the annoying type. I'm patient. But I'm also worried that I may have been hasty in signing a contract with someone who was abrupt on our phone chat (only gave me fifteen minutes) and didn't respond to my email. Should I be worried? Thanks so much. As always, your advice and guidance is greatly appreciated."

--Anonymous

The first question is whether your agreement had an out clause--a termination clause that gives you the option to fire her. If it doesn't, then you have no choice,

legally, but to stay with her. Practically, you could ask her to release you, but the choice is hers, and if she refuses, you owe her a commission, regardless of who sells it.

Whether she is competent or a good fit for you is a much harder question to answer. Just because she spoke to you for 15 minutes doesn't mean she's a bad agent; just because she hasn't responded to you in 3 weeks after promising edits doesn't mean she's bad either--reading and editing can take weeks, especially if it's long. It depends on the length of the manuscript. In general, it is always best to discuss timeframe upfront with an agent to get an idea of what to expect and avoid this situation. The fact that she hasn't answered an email in 10 days is more worrisome--but then again, she may have perceived herself as being pressured early on in the relationship. Hard to say. Email her again and see how quickly she answers, and what she has to say. I wouldn't necessarily worry now, but if she ignores you again, then there is cause for concern.

After a certain point you can turn the heat up and email and call. If she still doesn't answer, you may then want to fire her. But whether you can legally depends on your agreement.

In general, author/agent communication is always a tricky thing. It's always best to try to discuss these things openly upfront so that no one has any false expectations.

## **Is my age a problem?**

"I am a fourteen year-old author currently working on a YA novel. Pretty soon, I will start looking for a literary agent. Having no previous experience and being so young, would this make literary agents cautious? Or does age not matter as long as the book is well written?

Also, I was wondering if it matters how well known the agent and his/her publishings are. If the agent's books are not "popular", does that mean I should find someone else?

Thank you."

--Anonymous

If an agent's books are not "popular" that does not necessarily mean that he is not a good agent. Some agents may be starting out and have placed dozens of works which are not yet published. Remember, it can years from the time an agent makes a deal until the book is released. That is just one factor to consider. You must really consider a host of factors when deciding. I outline them all in depth in my ebook HOW TO LAND A LITERARY AGENT, which I give away for free. Download it.

Your age should not matter, whether you are young or old. Writing should be considered on its own merit.

That said, it is possible that there may be some agents who are biased. Just don't mention your age in the query letter. It's really none of their business anyway.

On the flip side, it is possible that your age may impress some agents, might be an angle to help them sell your work. But that is less likely, so better to err on the side of caution and not to mention it at all.

You remind me of myself: I finished my first novel at 15, and sent out query letters to dozens of agents. They all rejected it. The same held true for my second, third and fourth novels, over many years. Even my first book on the craft of writing, *THE FIRST FIVE PAGES*, was rejected by 30 publishers before S&S bought it. You need to really be tough and to hang in there, and to dig in for a multi-year effort. This is a business of rejection. Those who succeed are those who are willing to ignore it long enough and to fight through it.

**"Does my novel have to be set in America?"**

Hi Mr Lukeman, Thanks so much for the opportunity to ask a question at all. I'm working on a YA Urban Fantasy that is set in Sydney, Australia. I'm wondering if this would be a problem when it came to seeking representation and (hopefully, one day!) selling it. I'd always intended to seek representation by an American agent, and I wonder if I'm pigeon-holing myself before I begin. The story I'm telling isn't particularly Australian, but Sydney happens to be the setting.

Thanks so much for your time.

Sarah :)

In the ideal world, it is usually easier to land a deal in the U.S. if your work is set in America. That said, its being set in another country should not be a deal breaker. The quality of the writing will matter much more than the location. If the writing is good enough, you should be able to land a deal regardless. As an added benefit, if you do land a U.S. deal, it might make it a bit easier to sell Australian rights. And if you can't land a U.S. deal, you might be able to sell it directly to an AU publisher-- and then if the book does well over there, have another excuse to re-try U.S. houses. The real issue is whether Australia is just a setting for a timeless and universal story, or whether this is truly a local, Australian story. If the former, your chances are much better; if the latter, it becomes more of an issue.



## **Should I use a pseudonym?**

"Hello- I was wondering about using a pen name if my name is similar to someone who has a quasi-known name. There is a Harvard law professor named James L. Heskett who has published non-fiction books on economics. I would like to use my own name (Jim Heskett), is that too close? Should I go by Initials + Last name? Does it even matter if I would theoretically be writing fiction books? I've already started to try to build a brand around my name. If I was to switch to a pen name, would prefer to do so as soon as possible (reserving domain names, twitter accounts, etc.) Any advice you can give would be helpful"

--Jim

An unusual situation, and in your particular case I would say that it does not matter that his name is similar. It is not identical to yours. And the fact that you are writing fiction, and he is known for nonfiction, gives you even more distance. I can't imagine readers confusing the two of you, or it potentially hurting your sales.

That said, the issue of whether or not to use a pseudonym in general, is one that deserves more attention. You are correct to give this careful thought: readers make decisions to buy your books based on a number of factors, including jacket, title, and synopsis--and I would not say that it's too far-fetched to assume that a reader might even be influenced by your pen name. Whether or not a reader is influenced at purchase time, it certainly will hold a greater influence down the road, when it comes

to whether or not they remember your name. Branding is crucial. A name that's easier to remember might, in the long run, garner a larger readership. So you are correct to think carefully about this.

Whether or not to use a pseudonym has become a much bigger issue these days, with the advent of e-books. Many others are choosing to use pseudonyms because they want to feel free to write in different genres, and not be stereotyped. Some authors might already be famous in a particular genre, and they don't want to risk hurting their current readership by venturing off to a new genre, so they protect themselves with a pseudonym. There is nothing wrong with this, and in fact I believe this is a wise decision. People tend to remember one name for one genre, and there is a risk of confusing readers.

For many authors, it is important to them to use their real name. There is certainly nothing wrong with that either. I wouldn't necessarily assume that would hurt sales, either – I am sure you could come up with a ton of examples of best-selling authors with odd names.

However, if you decide to use a pseudonym, then I would say choose one very carefully. Do your research. You don't want to choose a name that is already famous, especially for another author. Ideally you want something shorter, easier to remember. You don't want something that obviously sounds fake. And you have to decide if you want a name that will resonate with men or women, depending on the genre in which you are writing. You might also do a preliminary search of domain name availability, and find out if the .com is available, which might impact your thinking. And you might even examine the names of other best sellers in your genre,

and ask yourself if the name you chose might subconsciously ring to readers as sounding like one of these.

Of course, at the end of the day, a pseudonym, no matter how good, will not substitute for great writing or for a great book. But it is just one more factor to consider.

## **Should I serialize my entire novel on my blog?**

"Hello Noah :D I'm new to writing, I'm currently working on a womens fiction novel that I hope to finish this year. I do not have an agent, as I'm not at that stage yet, however I have been researching agents, queries, publishing and the like. I've also been looking into indie publishing, but I'm no PR or sales expert. My question relates to copyright etc, and I'm hoping you can advise me...? I have been advised to 'blog the book,' chapter by chapter, to promote myself and my book, to hopefully gain an audience of potential readers before publication. However, although I will probably have to self publish initially , I understand that mainstream publishers buy the rights to your work when you sign a contract, so if I were to blog my actual book, would that mean that the rights would no longer be available to sell? Also, I have concerns re copyright theft. What is your opinion on 'blogging a book' as a means of promotion? Your advice would be greatly appreciated."

You were given bad advice.

I would not recommend serializing your entire novel on your blog. There are several issues at stake. The first, as you say, is that you will be posting the entire text of the book onto the Internet, and hypothetically, anyone could copy and paste it for themselves. There is certainly a possibility, however remote, of theft. You can, of course, copyright your book, but that won't necessarily prevent piracy.

The second concern would be giving away too much of it to readers. If they've read the whole thing, then why would they buy it? Typically, readers are given a free excerpt of 10 or 20 percent of the book. Rarely, if ever, are they given the entire book for free.

Third, if your blog gains a huge following or a tremendous number of fans, and they've all read the entire book, there could be a concern among agents or editors that you have already serialized your entire book. This concern could hypothetically be shared by magazines, newspapers, or other publications. There is a real value to first and second serial rights. If a book is extremely well received, it is possible that a publication may want to buy first serial rights. But if it has already been serialized completely on your blog, there may be some concerns. Of course, if you only have a few dozen followers, that probably won't be as much of a concern. Publishing professionals will probably overlook it, and just tell you to take it down. But I don't envision your giving away the entire book on your blog gaining you more followers than your just giving away portions of it.

Finally, there are much more effective ways to gain followers than by serializing your entire book on your blog. I am skeptical as to how many fans that might get you anyway. There are other things you can do which might gain you far more fans, and carry no risk. For example diversify your efforts to Facebook and Twitter and Goodreads and a host of other places, instead of just your blog.

Not to mention, even if you do gain a large number of followers on your blog, that by no means will assure you a book deal.

Keep in mind that we are strictly discussing serializing your book for free on your blog. This is an entirely different scenario than you're giving away your book for free in e-book format, for example as an e-book whose price is free on Amazon, iTunes, Kobo, or elsewhere. In some instances, that could be a very worthwhile endeavor. But that is an entirely different topic.

## **How many revisions?**

"Hi Noah, In "Land a Literary Agent" you say that a draft you send in to an agent should go through "20 or 40 revisions" first. I've never heard a consistent definition of revision, so I'm wondering what your idea of a revision is. I've heard "revision" mean everything from a complete rewrite to a read-through with a couple of minor grammatical changes. On a side note, thank you for making your work so available. I've read "Land a Literary Agent," "Write a Query Letter," and "Ask a Literary Agent Year 1," and I am currently reading "The Plot Thickens." I'm working on my first novel and I plan to use what I've learned from you to sell my book when it's done. Thanks"

--Allen

There is no firm rule as to how many revisions a work must go through. In my books on the craft of writing, which are read by a lot of beginning writers, I tend to be more strict, and err on the side of suggesting more, rather than fewer, revisions. A common problem among first-time authors is that they will assume that their book hardly needs to be revised before sending it out to publishing professionals. They might just go through one cursory revision and send it off in haste. By impressing the point for a great number revisions, my hope is that they take it to heart, and that they will do at least two or three revisions, even if I know they will not do twenty.

There is no fast rule for what defines a revision. Typically, a revision is considered to be a pass through your entire book. If it is a first revision, one would assume that a lot more work would be entailed in that pass than, for example, a fourth or fifth revision. By the time you get close to your final revision, it could certainly be a matter of just skimming through and looking for certain grammatical or typographical issues. It is different for every writer.

The other important thing to consider when it comes to revising your work is the issue, often overlooked, of time. We as human beings are changing every day, and the way that we perceive our own work will change from the day we wrote it, to a week later, to a month later, to three months later, to six months later, to a year later. That is one of the great virtues of giving yourself time between revisions: it gives you distance away from your work, gives the work time to breathe. It gives you a different perspective. You might notice that if you pick up a work that you have written five years later, you may have the funny experience of not even remembering what you wrote, or being surprised that you wrote it. That is because you have changed.

That said, there is also a great merit to not giving yourself time between other revisions. In fact, it is crucial that you hold your entire book in your head through some revisions, so that you can remember, in one sitting, instances of repetition. This is why all different types of revisions are called for: the revision done immediately, the revision done after time, the revision done in one sitting, and the revision done over multiple sittings. Just as there is a great virtue to holding your entire book in your head in one sitting, there's also a virtue in a different type of

revision, of isolating a random chapter and approaching it out of context. This will put it in yet another light.

That said, you don't want to revise forever, either. After a certain point, you have to let your book go. You learn a tremendous amount through revision, perhaps even more than by writing. I've heard it said that 90 percent of all writing is revision. But what some writers don't realize is that you also learn a tremendous amount by letting a book go. Through moving onto a new book. The learning curve on a single work is finite. In order to grow as a writer, you will need to embark on a completely new work, maybe even in a different genre.

### **How long should I wait for my agent?**

"Mr. Lukeman-- I am a first-time author and I've been working with an agent for a year and half (we signed a contract). In that time, I've done three revisions for her. This last revision, she assured me would be "the one." However, after I sent it to her, she said that while it was "Amazing and I will have no problem selling it" she still doesn't think it is the right version to send out. She also said she did not have time to offer me notes because of other commitments. I suggested (kindly) that perhaps we should part ways, but she assured me that she didn't want to do that and she would get me notes when she could. Should I stay or go? I'm not sure what signals she is sending. Thanks for your help"

On the one hand, most agents don't have time to offer multiple rounds of revisions, and one could argue that this is something rare and valuable, and that you should appreciate this and stick with this agent.

On the other hand, there is something wrong with this situation. To begin with, it is rare that an agent will take on a work and sign an author knowing that that work will need such extensive revision – so extensive that a year and a half later, and after three revisions, she still was not satisfied. That doesn't make sense. If an agent feels a work needs extensive revision, she will likely just reject the book, or, she might offer you to resubmit it after you've done the revision. But it is most unusual for an agent to sign you, then put you through years of revision to reach the point where she is

satisfied. And if that is the case, then that agent certainly should have warned you in advance that she expected to spend many years revising it until she would be satisfied, and have given you the opportunity to make that decision for yourself.

This sounds to me like the case of an agent who is a perfectionist, and who cannot be satisfied. She also sounds like an agent that moves exceedingly slowly, and takes way too much time. The vast majority of agents will not behave this way, so I would not call this normal behavior. I would no longer continue to deal with an agent like this. The way it is going, it sounds like the process could go on for months or years more, and you'll never even know if you will finally satisfy her. Not to mention, her vision of the book might end up being different than the vision of an acquiring editor at a publisher. That is one of the reasons why, as an agent, I'm always wary of asking an author to revise a work to suit my vision: writing is subjective, and it is inevitable that editors at the publishing houses will have their own vision, that may very well differ from mine. I can't tell you how many times I've sent out a novel, and then received dozens of rejection letters, with half of the editors complaining that the novel was too fast paced, while the other half complaining that the pace was too slow. If you revise to please one person, you will inevitably not be pleasing others.

In general, no agent should tie you up that long in the process, especially before even submitting your work. I don't foresee any good reason why it should take an agent more than three months, or six at the most, to get your book out the door – unless the delays are coming from you. Most agents will go out with a book within weeks, if not days, of signing the author.

So I would part ways and find someone else.

## **Was I correct to accept a deal directly from a publisher?**

"Hi, I have written my first 98,000 word novel and one fourth of the second novel in the series. I have now got offers from 4 publishers - one in England, and 3 in the US - with great reviews. These are not from agents; they are offers directly from publishers. I did not even have to look for long. Does that mean my book and series is good? Does it mean that I might make good money from my works? I have selected one of the American publishers in order to reach an American audience. "

--Jenni

Congratulations. This is most unusual. If the publishers who offered on your book are major, reputable publishers, such as Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, etc., then your book must certainly be very good. It is extremely unusual for this to happen to an author. Even when agents submit a novel, in most cases, they are lucky to just get a bid from one major publisher. So I would say that the signs are very positive.

If you have not yet signed a contract, one thing to keep in mind is that if three major publishers love your work so much, it is quite likely that even more will, too. The virtue of having an agent is that she can reach dozens of imprints that you may not be aware of – and that she has very good personal relationships with the acquiring editors. In situations where authors sell books directly to publishers, authors think that they're getting a great deal because they are saving an agent's

commission. But in reality, the opposite is true: if the book is good enough to be sold without the help of an agent, then that usually indicates that an agent would have been able to get far more bids for the author, and have coordinated a wide auction – and used her leverage and negotiating skills to get the advance and royalties to be significantly higher. Not to mention that the agent would also negotiate a far better contract.

So if you have not yet signed a contract, I would suggest your finding an agent and having her coordinate a massive submission and auction for you.

Regardless of what happens, you must be very talented, and you have a bright future ahead of you. Congratulations.

## **How should I handle my sales history?**

Hi Noah, My question is also about trying to publish again. My literary novel was published by a major house, but I did not earn back my advance. I simply do not know how to address (or ignore) this issue in my queries. I have two additional novels and would really like to get them out in the world. How tough is this going to be for me? Thanks for any help you can give.

There are two different issues here. The first is whether or not you earned back your advance. And the second is how many copies you sold, and in what format. For example, if you are paid a million dollar advance and only earned back \$500,000 of it, you would still be in good shape, because that means you have sold a lot of books. So the issue here is really the number of copies sold, and in what format. 50,000 copies sold in hardcover is hugely significant, and would virtually guarantee you another deal. But 50,000 copies sold in mass-market is not impressive, and certainly would not guarantee you another deal.

Sales history is a major issue for most authors. Most authors who are lucky enough to break through and finally land a deal find themselves in the frustrating position of having had their first book published and not selling well. The only thing harder than trying to land a deal for an author who has never been published is trying to land a second deal for an author who has been published to a poor sales record. The problem is, there is no way to hide it. You need to let agents and

editors know in your bio that you have indeed been published, especially if you plan on using your real name. They will know of your publishing history. And once they do, the first thing editors will do when they receive your submission is type your name into Bookscan, and it will tell them exactly how many copies you sold. There is no way to hide it. So there really is no dilemma of whether or not to tell them. They will know for themselves.

You are correct to think that this puts you in a very difficult position. It does. If you have scores of glowing reviews and awards, despite poor sales, that could help. If the genre is literary they may be more forgiving. But ultimately you just have to hope that you find that one editor who falls so much in love with your work that he is willing to give you another chance. It is not impossible. I've seen it happen, many times. But it is not easy.

## **Will an agent represent me just for one genre of fiction?**

Hi Noah. Really enjoy the blog. I had a question about writing under a pseudonym. I've written several books of narrative nonfiction with a major house, two of which became NY Times bestsellers. I also have a crime novel coming out next year, all with the same agent. I've recently finished a supernatural novel that I want to publish under a pseudonym, to create a separate identity for that part of my work. My agent doesn't represent any supernatural authors and doesn't know that world. I'm also concerned that some editors believe I'm too prolific and that branching out into a new genre will be seen negatively. If I have my agent send out the supernatural title, I'm sure the industry will know that I'm the author, as the style isn't that far removed from my crime book, and my agent does very little fiction in general. I've let my agent know I'd like to seek other representation for my supernatural work, but my question is: will other agents be willing to represent just my horror?

This is a tricky issue, for several reasons.

If your agent represented you just for nonfiction, and you wanted to branch out and find a new agent to handle just fiction, that would be much simpler and more feasible. I would see no issue with that.

The complicating factor is that your current agent does represent you for fiction – crime fiction – and you want to find another agent to represent you just for

supernatural fiction. That will be messy. There are several issues to consider. There are legal issues. You will have to check your contract very carefully with your publisher of crime fiction. There may be more of an issue with them than with the agent: typically when a house signs you for fiction, they will have an option on your next novel. In most cases they will not specify what genre of fiction. You may be obliged to submit to them. And depending on the agreement with your agent, your agent may be entitled to a commission on option book with the deal he's already set up. So that all has to be sorted out first, as well as any agreements you may have signed with your agent to represent you for fiction in general.

Assuming that you are legally free and clear, the other obstacle will be whether another agent wants to represent you just for horror. That will not be that easy to find. Typically if an agent takes you on, he will want to take you on for anything you write, fiction or nonfiction. Finding an agent just to represent you for fiction is harder. But finding agent to represent you just for one genre fiction is even harder. A lot of agents will resist, unless you are an already established mega-bestseller in that particular genre fiction.

Even so, if the agent should land you a deal with a publisher, you're going to have the same sticky issues with your new publisher regarding option clauses, and clauses that specify you should not be working on another work of fiction at the same time. The pseudonym will help. But it will not completely clear you.

Your safest bet might be to self publish your horror under a pseudonym online, as an e-book – assuming that is something that you want to do. If it is very

successful, you might not find the desire to even find a print deal. If it is not, you can always revisit the issue of a print deal.

In any case, what you are proposing is difficult, and fraught with many potential issues, but not impossible. But if you have a good relationship with your current publisher of crime fiction – that is the natural place to start. They may also want to publish your horror. And if they do, I see no reason why your current agent couldn't negotiate that deal.

## **How do I switch agents?**

"Question: Does it reflect badly on an author (in regards to future deals) to change literary agents mid-contract? Obviously, my current agent is entitled to any monies earned by current and past deals, but I'm wondering how to professionally and ethically switch agents before I submit any more proposals to publishers. I hate that I'm even considering this-- I'm a very loyal person and my agent has sold several books for me-- but this last contract has revealed some ethical issues (dishonesty, missteps) that have made me feel like I cannot trust her. Also, if I were to switch agents, how would I start the process? By contacting the old agent? Submitting to new agents?"

To begin with, read these two posts from this blog, one from 2009 and one from 2010. They will explain a lot. I already covered much of this ground in previous answers:

<http://askaliteraryagent.blogspot.com/2010/01/can-i-fire-my-agent-mid-submission.html>

<http://askaliteraryagent.blogspot.com/2009/10/if-my-agent-doesnt-like-my-next-book.html>

There are several issues at stake here. First, you need to make sure that legally you are able to fire your agent. You will have to check the agency agreement that you signed with her. Every agency agreement is different. Some agreements commit

authors to multi-book and/or multi-year obligations. The most important clause here will be the termination clause, if one even exists. That is a clause which allows you the right to terminate the agreement, and specifies upon what conditions. For example, a clause might read that you can notify your agent in writing and after 90 days notice, the agreement is terminated.

But it is often more complex than this. From an agent's perspective, if an agent is working hard on a book and it is actively on submission and an author for whatever reason decides to fire him, the agent justifiably has to protect himself so that his work is not for nothing, and often there will be a clause stating that in the case of termination he is entitled to commission if that active submission should become successful. And it could take several months for publishers to respond. So there is often some sort of waiting window even after termination.

But after that window has passed, for example three or six months later, and the book is no longer actively on submission, then, assuming your agent allows you to terminate, there should be no reason why the agent continues to be entitled to commission. You don't want to end up in a situation where you terminate your agent, hire another agent, that agent sells your book, and the old agent comes out of the woodwork for commission on a deal that she did not make. Then you are stuck paying double commission. It all depends on what you signed.

Every agent has a different way of operating. Some agents will let you out of an agreement if you simply ask. Others will refuse. Some are litigious; some are not.

As far as finding a new agent, the big issue for them will be whether or not the current work has already been submitted, and how many publishers have seen it. If

your old agent has already sent the work all over town, and there is nowhere left for the new agent to submit, then he won't want to take it on. That will be the bigger issue.

Ethically, if an author comes to an agent and tells him he has just fired his old agent, especially mid submission, it will certainly raise a red flag, and he will want to know why. If the old agent has acted unethically, and the author can prove it, then that of course explains it. But if the agent has not acted unethically, and the author is just demanding, then that is a different story and can turn off some agents. An agent's deciding whether or not to take on a book is always a combination of the book and the author behind it.

## **Can I post excerpts of my work online?**

"Dear Mr. Lukeman, I was wondering if it was legal to post sample chapters of a book on, say, Facebook? I have been trying to publish for a while and want to establish my career as an author, so wish to create a Facebook page for my work. However, I am not sure if posting sample chapters would deter agents from picking up my work or if I could not do that because, once published, I would have restricted rights to post material. Any help would be appreciated. Thanks! "

There are two questions here. The first is whether or not, legally, you have the right to post excerpts of your own work on Facebook or anywhere else online. The answer is yes, you do. You own the work, and it is yours to do with as you wish. Of course, this is assuming that you have not signed any agreements with any publishers for its publication which might restrict such activity.

The second question is about marketability and overexposure. I addressed the topic of serialization and overexposure in a recent blog post. Please search this blog for the response to that. But just to recap briefly, you don't want to risk overexposing your book too much, giving away all of it for free online. It can certainly be a good strategy to give away a little bit of it, say one or two chapters – but I would not recommend serializing the entire book.

The other issue is whether this strategy would turn away a potential agent. It is doubtful. Unless your page is read by millions, usually posting a chapter or two of it

will have such little impact that it is not likely to affect an agent or publisher's decision. And it can work both ways: if you're giving away the book for free, and millions of people are downloading it, that just might help you entice an agent or publisher to want to take it on. Keep in mind that while I don't recommend serializing your entire book for free, giving your entire book away, as an e-book for sale on the etailers with the price listed as free, is a different matter entirely, which I will not go into here.

## **Can I re-submit after revision?**

"Hi Noah, I have a question about querying that I haven't been able to find an answer to. After sending out a few queries, I received some advice that I really thought would improve my book. I took the advice and made some changes to my manuscript that changed the opening of the book (which I had already sent with some queries) as well as the length of the novel. Here's my question: What should you do if your manuscript changes after you've already queried? Obviously the MS is different than your sample pages, so what do you do? Thanks, ALC "

I wouldn't worry about this too much. From your post, first of all, it sounds as if you have only sent your queries out to a few agents. Typically, it takes sending a query letter out to dozens and dozens of agents until you land one. It is a numbers game. Chances are that you will not land an agent based on your small initial round anyway. So if the work that you already sent them is not in the best shape, there is not much you can do about it now, but I wouldn't worry about it too much, either.

If you were to contact these agents again with the revision of a query, it would likely be perceived that you as an author are too high maintenance. An agent does not wish to take on an author who is constantly submitting them revisions and never happy with the work. I have seen situations in the past where some authors will never be happy with their books, and revise endlessly, all throughout the process, even going right up to publication day, driving their agents and editors crazy. While

you do want the best work you can have, you don't want to be perceived as one of these. It is too much work for everyone involved. At a certain point, you have to lock it down and be happy with it. Of course, the very nature of revision demands that we will never be happy with our works as authors. Which is why this is even an issue to begin with. At virtually any point in time, any author could look back at their work and want to make changes. At some point, we have to move on.

The other issue here is that, if an agent likes your general concept and genre and bio enough, presumably the agent would be intrigued to see more based on your initial query letter. If you made some minor revisions, that shouldn't impact their decision too much anyway.

Also be wary in general of making revisions based on a single agent or editor's comments. Publishing is a very subjective business, and if you change your manuscript to suit one person's needs, you might find that the other agents or editors would have preferred it the way it was originally. It is good to listen to people, but it is good to trust yourself, too.

## **Will my location affect my ability to land a deal?**

"Hi Noah, I'm a 13 year old writer from Singapore. As the arts scene is not very vibrant in my country, I wish to find an American/British publisher. Do you think they will entertain my requests, taking into consideration my country? Thanks! "

I wouldn't worry about this too much. Good writing is universal. When an agent receives a manuscript, he takes it on its own terms. He does not – or at least he should not – look at the author bio to decide what country the author is from when making a decision. Good writing is good writing. And bad writing is bad writing. I'd rather take on a good author from Singapore than a lousy one from New York City. I don't see readers discriminating when making their purchases either – and I'm sure we can point to a ton of bestsellers written by authors who live all around the world.

The bigger issue will be whether your book is strictly about Singapore, and in a very limited way. That is not to say that a book about Singapore could not become a huge international bestseller. But if your book, the way you have written it, feels very local and specific to publishers, and feels as if it could not translate to other places and other cultures, then that might give them pause. So it is really about the topic of your book – and your writing style and execution -- not about where you live.

As far as your age, it is possible that could give some agents or publishers pause. I would not necessarily advertise your age in your query letter. Let them read and accept your work on its own terms. Then if they decide to accept it, you can always

tell them after the fact. Indeed, in some cases that could end up being a selling point, as well.

The most important thing for you to worry about, being 13, is that you should keep writing, keep revising, keep improving your skills, and keep reading. At your age, you are building the foundation and building blocks for a long and successful career as an author. No matter what, don't get discouraged. It can take many writers many years of rejections before they break through. Don't let it affect you, don't pay too much attention to it, and whatever you do, keep writing and keep trying.

## **Should I submit to magazines first?**

"Greetings Mr. Lukeman: For the sake of argument, let's just say I have a body of humorous non-fiction stories, well-written essays that comprise more than enough laugh-out-loud moments to capture the attention of an agent and/or publisher. Let's say I have enough material for several books and I'm the kind of author who's central character (in other words, his own personality) could be rendered for marketing purposes, much in the same way the "character" of David Sedaris is central to most of his work. (And please forgive me for being yet another one of the thousands of aspiring authors who directly or indirectly compare themselves to David Sedaris...) Once again I'll ask you to play along with me and pretend, for the moment, I'm the next great American icon of literature, as of yet undiscovered. Here's the question: should I submit one or more of these stories first to magazines for hopeful publication, or should I bypass that route and submit them (to an agent) as a full book?"

There is no black and white answer to this. On the one hand, if you are successful in landing one of your stories in a major, national publication, like the New Yorker, then yes, that can make all the difference in the world. On the other hand, if you are only able to land your story in a lesser known publication, that may end up not having any impact – and indeed, if you land your stories in too many

publications, it could even potentially turn off an agent or editor, because they might feel as if the book has been over serialized, and overexposed.

The other issue is that if you submit your stories to all the major publications, and they all reject you, you've lost your one shot. It is possible that if an agent had submitted the same story, or a sub rights director at a publishing house, perhaps the same publications would have accepted your story. Unfortunately, who is doing the submitting can often make a big difference in how seriously your story is paid attention to.

But then again, agents rarely have time to submit individual stories to magazine, and the same is true with rights departments. It all depends on the book. For some authors, sub rights are very big deal, and a single story can demand six figures in a publication. But for the vast majority of authors, they will never sell serial rights, and if they do, it will be to a lesser publication, and for a nominal fee of a few hundred dollars. That is why it is hard to make blanket generalizations.

The other consideration is that it could take you many many months of trying to place your stories in magazines, and one does not want to put on hold his career or his search for an agent too long. Especially because the chances of your landing your stories in a place that can actually impact an agent's decision, like the New Yorker, are very slim. And you don't want to spend so many months to finally land your stories in lesser magazines, and then search for an agent only to discover that even these small successes will not impact the agent's decision.

Thus I would recommend just submitting directly to agents, and not waiting on magazines. If your writing is good enough, the agent should want to take it on

anyway. And if it is not good enough, then landing a piece likely will not make much of a difference. Of course, if you have exhausted your agent search, and the manuscript is sitting there, you can always try the magazines then. And if you do land one in a major place, then you can reapproach the agents.

Also keep in mind that in this day and age, there are many ways to approach it. Some websites can have even more impact than magazines--if you get millions of reads on a site, that can influence an agent's decision. Or if you break your humor into tweets and have millions of followers, that can make the difference, too.

## **Do I need photographs?**

Dear Mr. Lukeman, I have written a novel in the historical fiction genre, and I have identified seven photographs that I want to include. I have already begun the process of securing rights to them, and it doesn't look like there will be any problems. My question is: if I send out a query letter to an agent, and the agent wants to see part or all of the manuscript, I think it's important that I send the pictures along with the prose - do I need to have already paid for the rights to the photos, or can I just note that I don't have the rights yet (i.e. haven't paid for them) but that the owner is known and the rights are securable?

First of all, keep in mind that most novels, whether historical or not, do NOT include photographs. You might want them in, but chances are that, assuming you sell it, your editor will not. So I would not recommend your doing all this legwork.

For those of you who are considering inserting photos in your book, keep in mind the following:

If your editor agrees to insert photographs, then you will have to supply them (i.e. pay for them). This can be quite costly. I've seen photo permissions cost \$400 to \$1,000 or more per picture. Depends where you get them from. It's possible they can be less, but regardless, they will cost you. Unless you turn to public domain images-- which editors may or may not want.

Additionally, it can take MONTHS to get all the written paperwork done for permissions for the photos. Thus editors begin this process early. Many times it causes a problem, when the work needs to go to press and photos are not signed off on.

Also keep in mind that you will need to secure WORLDWIDE rights to photos, something that authors frequently overlook. If your publisher controls world rights they will need this--and if you or your agent control world, then you will need this. The time to do it is upfront, not later. And this can increase the cost.

Also keep in mind that if your manuscript includes photos then legally the publisher only has to pay you on delivery and acceptance of ALL materials--thus if you deliver your manuscript and the photos aren't cleared for many more months, you won't get your advance delivery payment until then.

In any case, a discussion of photos is not one to be having when it comes to fiction--and especially at the stage of seeking an agent.

## **Which publishers should I submit to?**

What are some good publishers that we can use? I have recently written a book and received an offer from Tate Publishing but turned it down due to their contract. So now I'm off to looking for another publisher. Any suggestions?

If your goal is to land a traditional publishing deal with a major publisher, then you should find a literary agent first. You should not submit directly to publishers, for many reasons (your not knowing which to choose being just one of them). In fact, submitting directly can do you more harm than good. I speak to this topic at length in my book, HOW TO LAND (AND KEEP) A LITERARY AGENT, which I give away for free. [www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com) I suggest you read the chapter devoted to this topic.

### **Can I submit requested material via email?**

I have a question in regards to publishing. I want to send a manuscript to a publisher who allows sending manuscripts either as a hard copy by post or by email. I wanted your opinion on which way is better.

If a publisher or literary agent specifies that they have no preference as to whether you submit via hard copy or email, then feel free to submit either way. Neither form of submission will necessarily gain you an advantage--or hurt you. In general, always follow an agent's guidelines. The bigger issue to worry about is your biasing an agent to your work because you submit a manuscript via email when he specifically requests hard copy--or vice versa. Just respect their wishes and all will be fine.

## **Can I submit to multiple agents simultaneously?**

If an agent doesn't specify that they don't accept simultaneous submission, then can I assume that they do? I have my novel with one agent now, but would prefer to have it with more if possible.

I always suggest submitting your manuscript or proposal or query letter to as many agents as possible--and to do so simultaneously. It is hard to land an agent, and hard to land a book deal, and it is also a very subjective and slow-moving business. If you submit to one at a time, or just a few at a time, you can be waiting years to further your career. I would always err on the side of a more aggressive approach. Even if three agents like your work, all three can still reject it when reading more. Don't wait on anyone--unless a bona fide agent takes a genuine interest in your work and is responding rapidly and requests a limited time window, say a few weeks, of exclusivity.

I speak to this topic at length in my book **HOW TO LAND (AND KEEP) A LITERARY AGENT**, which I give away for free. I suggest you read it.

[www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com)

## **How to phrase my query letter?**

Dear Mr. Lukeman, Your books are among my favorite writing references. As I prepare my query letter, your advice on the topic has been particularly useful. I've composed a personal query that I feel reflects the type of novel I have written. Yet, frequently I've come across emphatic advice to place the hook in the first paragraph, leading with such phrasing as "When Jane Doe is faced with (random compelling crisis)" or the like. My tastes lean toward literary fiction, and when I imagine phrasing my query leading with a hook, it doesn't suit my story. In your query letter book, you mentioned how conflicting the advice is on the subject. Is it due to genre preference perhaps? Do you consider this type of format more typically used with manuscripts of commercial fiction?

It is impossible to say, to speak in generalities, without having a chance to read your query letter specifically. In every case it will be different.

The most important thing to realize here is that query letters are limited; you only have finite space. They are also showcases for writers to exhibit their talent with word economy and with their ability to grip a reader in just a few sentences. On any given day at a major literary agency, hundreds of queries might arrive. Yours must stand out. Not in a cheap, gimmicky way. But in an organic way, one reflective of you and your writing. That said, it is not a passive letter--it must be an active one,

one that appreciates how much is at stake, and how much must be accomplished in a short period of time. Remember what Mark Twain said:

"I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."

## Should memoir be treated as fiction?

"You say to treat memoir as fiction when querying, and that makes sense to me. My concern is, will I irritate agents if I don't follow their specific guidelines for submitting non-fiction?"

When querying, memoir needs to be treated as fiction in certain respects: as with fiction, the entire manuscript should be finished before you query; as with fiction, your concept won't matter as much as the execution of the writing; and, unless you are a celebrity or have a major, national platform, your background and platform won't matter as much. It is more about the writing itself, whereas with most types of commercial non-fiction, greater weight is given to your expertise, the competition, the market and other issues.

Most agents should specify guidelines for submission of fiction, non-fiction and memoir. If they don't specify, then at first you can treat memoir as non-fiction for the sake of initiating a submission. For example, most agents want you to begin with a one page query letter--and in that case, just send in a letter, and if they want more, they should tell you how much they want. If they ask for a proposal, the typical non-fiction proposal contains an overview, an outline and 1 or 2 chapters, and you can send that. Don't worry--these distinctions are not so important, because if they want more, they will tell you exactly what they want. The important thing to remember is that, unlike other types of non-fiction, with a memoir you should not query until

your entire manuscript is complete. You don't want to have an agent like the first two chapters and then not have the manuscript ready to show for two more years.

### **Should I add anything extra in my query letter?**

"Mr. Lukeman, If I can describe my plot in two sentences, is it okay to use the third sentence in that paragraph to describe the voice in my writing or is that amateurish? Thanks a lot," Donna Voss

I would really suggest sticking to the basics of what is necessary in a query letter, and keeping it as brief as possible. If you can summarize your plot in two sentences--great. That does not mean you should add a third sentence just for the sake of it. And in this case I would not attempt to describe the voice of your writing--that is the sort of thing that agents must judge for themselves, and which will come out in the writing as they read it. Voice is also subjective, and they must be left to come to their own conclusions.

### **Is it more important for the story to be well done or marketable?**

"Dear Mr. Lukeman, I've noticed a trend in YA books, that many follow the exact same popular formulas and are inhabiting an increasingly narrow scope. I keep hearing literary agents say they're "looking for something different", but I'm starting to doubt the validity of that. Why would you take a risk on something that might not make money in an industry that's becoming increasingly difficult to make money in, when you can just follow a formula that is guaranteed to make you money? I can't for one second believe that something like Watership Down would be published in this day and age, (and it definitely wouldn't be published by an American publisher), despite it never being out of print. My question is, when the average attention span of a literary agent is ten times less than that of the average reader, and query letters at best show the competence of a writer, is it more important in this day and age for the story to be well done or for the story to be marketable? "

'This is an age old question, and not an easy one to answer. In the ideal world, a story will be both well done--and unique--and marketable. I don't necessarily view the two as mutually exclusive. If your desire is to write commercial YA, then there is no reason why you cannot come up with a unique concept within that genre and to strive for the execution of the writing, word by word, to be as strong as possible.

If you are dealing with literary fiction and the writing is superb but the overall genre is not as commercial as certain genres of YA, then you may indeed have a

harder time. Then again, if you are writing in commercial YA and your writing is not up to par, you may have a hard time as well. It is also possible that your writing is superb but you are not good at marketing and at summary, and your query letter doesn't get the attention of an agent. It depends on why you are writing--if you are writing to cash in, and chasing the most commercial genre of the moment, then your approach will likely be more marketing-focused. If you are writing literary fiction because that is your passion, then your approach will be different. You must follow your heart.

I would say that, as a rule, if an agent is looking to represent commercial fiction then he or she will scan a query letter with a different set of criteria--with an eye for marketability of the genre and concept. If an agent is looking for literary fiction he will be more drawn to your bio, credentials and the quality of your style. He might be more forgiving when it comes to plot. From an agent's point of view, if one is looking for commercial fiction it is always a nice surprise if the writing is particularly well done; and if one is looking for literary fiction, it is a nice surprise if there is also a strong plot. In this day and age I feel the gap has been widening between literary and commercial--but that needn't be the case. Those are arbitrary distinctions. A literary novel can be commercial and a commercial novel can be literary. Moby Dick is beautifully written, but also has a plot. So does Heart of Darkness. A hundred years ago literary authors knew they had to have a plot, not just pretty prose. For them, literary and commercial fiction were one.

### **If I self-publish first, will it hurt my chances?**

"Hi Mr. Lukeman, thanks for fielding these questions. My question is related to this post, but perhaps a little more specific: does it reflect positively or poorly to self-publish first, then seek an agent later? The reason I ask is because I tried getting my memoir published, but despite pieces of my story appearing in the New York Times and the Chicken Soup series, I got no bites for a year. So, I tried my hand at self-publishing and sold about 2,500 hard copies of my book in its first year. I didn't pay for any book marketing, it was merely word-of-mouth that got any of the books sold. I'm hoping to start looking for literary agents again, but am not sure if mentioning that I self-published already would ultimately hurt or help my book. Thank you!"

I am pretty sure I answered a similar question in depth a year or so ago on this blog. Please check the archives for that response, too. But I will answer it again here:

First, we must distinguish between print and ebook self-publishing. To start with the former: if you self-publish and sell a huge number of copies, then it is a huge benefit to landing a deal, and may even make the difference. If you sell only a few copies, it won't impress agents or make a difference. There is a gray area in between. 2,500 hardcovers on your own is respectable. But it won't tip the scales. 25,000 would. 15,000 would raise eyebrows but not close the deal. Depends, too, on whether it's fiction or non-fiction and the genre and on your platform and how and where you sold them and the price point. Hardcover sales are much more impressive

than trade paperback, and trade paperback much more so than mass market. In most cases, sales are nominal and there is no real distribution--in those cases, it shouldn't really make a difference. However, if you sell around 10,000 or so copies and get real distribution and your name is in the system everywhere, and especially if you already received a lot of publicity, then hypothetically that could be an issue for an editor, who might feel that their chance to launch the book in a clean way is gone. So it is a calculated risk. I would not recommend it, since in most cases it is very costly and time consuming and won't work.

Self-publishing in ebook format is a different story. It affords you much more flexibility, since it costs you nothing, and since you can use a pen name and thus allow for a clean slate in the system--and if it takes off, it can make the difference. So you have a lot less to lose and more to gain by going that route.

Mr. Lukeman is giving away the enclosed three books for free, as a way of giving back to the writing community. We hope you read it, enjoy it, and prosper from it. If you wish, feel free to support Mr. Lukeman's other books:

also by Noah Lukeman

*The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile*

*The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life*

*A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*

The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II: The Seed of Banquo

To ask Mr. Lukeman questions about writing and publishing,  
or to join his e-zine, please visit his blog:  
[www.askaliteraryagent.com](http://www.askaliteraryagent.com)