

How To Break Into Print Publishing

The big question. Do you submit directly to publishers, or do you find an agent who will do that for you? It can work either way. Many publishers refuse to read unagented submissions, but on the other hand Tom Clancy and John Grisham sold their first books without an agent.

The bottom line is, if a publisher reads what he can sell, he'll buy it. It doesn't matter if it comes from an author or an agent. The trick is getting him to read it. That's always your focus.

The most important step is to get your presentation looking as professional as possible. No mistakes. None. Zero. Nada. The vast majority of rejections aren't because the story is "bad," but because the Acquisitions Editor concludes that it'll be too much work to make it "ready to read." With new authors, publishers usually lose money. Advertising, print inventory... Don't ask them to invest a great deal of editing time as well. They won't do it. It's just that simple.

The Selection Process

The most important part of getting your error-free manuscript published is choosing the right market. The best way to do this is to read books that are aimed at the same target audience as your own. If you want to approach publishers directly, look at who published those books. Their marketing machine is already positioned to announce your manuscript to your target audience, and they want more books of the type that you write. They're your best bet.

Some authors thank their editors. If you're going straight to the publishers, note the editors' names and use those, preferably after a phone call to ensure the editor still works there. If you can, just phone the publisher and tell whoever answers the phone something like "I'm writing a letter to so-and-so, and I want to be sure I'm spelling the name correctly." I used to be a secretary. I liked quick, easy questions.

If you want to approach an agent first, look in the acknowledgements sections of those books. Some authors thank their agents. Look up those agents and start with them. Tell how you found them. This might impress them because it makes you look professional. You know they've got a track record in your genre. They know how to sell to publishers who are aimed at your target audience, so let them do it.

Whichever method you use, go in fully prepared. Meaning, work through all the steps below before you submit anything.

Overview

Your aim is to convince someone who not only does not know you, but does not want to know you, and has read too many bad books, that your book is different. For this you need a cover letter, bio, synopsis, and sample chapter of such wit, wisdom and genius that even the most jaded and cynical editor can take pleasure in it.

Take your time. Don't just whip up something in a day and send it out. You're probably looking at a one or two year gap between acceptance and publication. So in the grand scheme of things, taking the time to make your presentation really shine won't matter. EXCEPT, it'll ensure you get published in the first place.

Every publisher should have writers guidelines. Get them. Read them. Follow them. They're using the process of elimination to get out of reading these submissions. The first step in that process is to bump off everyone who can't follow the guidelines. Don't be one of them.

Preparing Your Query Letter

This will be the first impression they get of you. Make it a good one! Edit that letter as hard as you would a manuscript, and make the damn thing perfect. Make it good writing. Sum up your book in such a way as to make the recipient of the letter say, "Wow, I want to read this book."

The first page of your book, along with the jacket text, are what usually determines whether a browser buys your book or puts it back on the shelf. As you write your query letter, think of what you'd put on that book jacket, and work that concept into your letter.

Never address your query letter To Whom It May Concern, Dear Editor, or any of that. Get a name. When you find the books that you really like, and are searching them for potential publishers, call those publishers. Ask who edited those books. If you want to approach the publisher directly, write to those editors.

You can find more excellent information on the submission and publication process at:

<http://www.absolutewrite.com/>

<http://www.caderbooks.com/pubfaq.html>

<http://www.dsmagency.com/published.html>

<http://www.fictionfactor.com/guests/findagent.html>

<http://www.fictionfactor.com/children/chances.html>

<http://www.jkelman.com/publish/>

<http://www.sff.net/people/justinvs/howtopub.html>

With a simple bit of good writing, and we all know you can do that since you've already written and polished your manuscript, you'll make it past this first hurdle. The editor reads your letter, sees nothing in it to stop him from continuing, and has no choice.

What would stop him? Typos. Grammar. Spelling. Boredom. Or anything that says "I write so much better than Stephen King that he's not fit to hold my jock strap. Buy my book and we'll both get rich."

Writing Your Bio

Don't lie. That's the first rule. The second rule is, don't forget any writing credits. List everything relevant you've got. Publications in decent magazines or newspapers. Credits in TV, films, theaters. Any literary prize you've managed to get in adulthood. The fact that you're a professor of English or an editor of a sports journal.

If you have no literary background, no education, and no respectable publications, but you spent fifteen years in solitary confinement in a Siberian Work Camp, that might indicate that you have a story to tell. But if you're writing about cuddly koalas to entertain the under-five crowd, this piece of information may be more than anyone needs to know.

You can list your credits either chronologically or from most impressive to least impressive. Just whichever puts you in the best light. You want to look like you're already a successful author. You don't want to sound arrogant, but you do want to sound confident. Keep it to a single page. You don't want to waste anybody's time. They don't have enough. (Who does?)

If your bio is so bare of details that it's more of a liability than an asset, forget about it. Maybe your "bio" equals a sentence or two, in which case you can work it into your query letter instead of a separate document.

Your goal, remember, is to get that editor to read your synopsis or manuscript. To judge it on its own merits. If he reads your writing and rejects it, you gave it your best shot. Try a few more, and if they all reject it, think about improving your writing. But you don't want that editor to stop reading your submission before he gets to your writing. So, take the time to do the query letter and bio correctly.

Writing Your Synopsis

To quote at least one agent, "There is no such thing as a good synopsis." And how can there be? How do you sum up 50,000 or 100,000 words in a page or two? I'll tell you how I do it. Very badly.

Having said that, this is your first chance to show the publisher that you can write. Some publishers want a minimal amount of information on first contact (query letter, bio, synopsis). Others want to see the first chapter or two as well. Nobody wants to see the whole manuscript at first, except those who say so in their writers' guidelines. If you include sample chapters, the chance of them being read depends largely on the quality of your query letter and synopsis.

Keep your synopsis short, two pages maximum unless the writers' guidelines say differently. Shorter is better. Pick out the theme and the strengths of your book and, in as clever a fashion as possible, relay these qualities in a brief chronology. The chronology is less important than the theme because, in truth, your only hope with a synopsis is that your theme or concept will strike a chord with the editor or agent reading it.

If your story is funny, your synopsis should be funny. If it's a romantic story, then your synopsis should be a romantic synopsis. You are a writer, and here is where you can be creative.

Many great works of literature don't have easily defined stories, just fine writing and good characters. If you have no story, then you have to sell your idea. Your synopsis must have fine, clear writing. Say how your book starts, how it ends, and the interest in the middle. This isn't the time for cliffhangers.

Your sample chapter should do the main talking, but your synopsis should offer up those clever memorable sound bites that will linger in the editor's mind and convince him to read the sample chapter.

I recently ran across a pretty good article on how to write a synopsis at <http://www.romancewriter2writer.com/synopses.htm>

Preparing Your Manuscript

Did I mention that your manuscript must be flawless? I'll mention it again. Your manuscript must be flawless. Especially be sure that the first chapter(s), the "hook" that you submit, will be the type that grabs the reader and makes him/her/it wonder what happens next.

For questions of paper size, margins, etc., consult the writers' guidelines for your prospective publisher(s) and follow them precisely. Do what they say and they'll read your manuscript. Fail to do so and they'll set it down unread, even if you're the next John Grisham.

Remember, they're budgeting their time and trying to get out of reading this stuff. Once they read it, they'll be fair. (If not, you don't want them.) If it's good solid writing, you're

in. But until they get to your writing, they always expect the worst. If you'd seen some of the crap that comes their way, you'd be just as pessimistic. But in the end they do love good writing or else they'd quit that job.

Literary Agents Revisited

Here's some advice from the [Agent Research and Evaluation](#) website. They define an agent as:

"...someone who makes a living selling real books to real publishers. No one representing himself as an agent should also claim to be a book doctor, an editor-for-hire, a book 'consultant' of any kind. They shouldn't charge any type of 'upfront' reading fee, marketing fee, evaluation fee or any other fee apart from a commission on work sold.

"With the possible exception of certain MINIMAL office expenses, legitimate agents NEVER handle [the expenses connected with submitting manuscripts] as an upfront cost. Only as a billable expense after being shown to have been incurred.

"Remember, real agents live off the commissions they make from selling their clients' projects. Scammers live off up-front fees for unnecessary, inadequate, or non-existent services."

This is excellent advice. Anyone can call himself an agent, get himself listed somewhere, and tell every author who sends him a manuscript "This is excellent. Send me some money and I'll sell it." Then he can pocket the author's money and do absolutely nothing, or send the manuscript to the same publishers who reject everything else he sends them.

Agents work for a percentage of your sales. It's usually 15%. An agent's source of income must be the books he sells. If the author pays him before he closes a sale, where is his incentive to close the sale?

Insist that your agent send you copies of all rejection letters. A great agent should offer this without you asking, and those rejection letters shouldn't *all* be *undated* "Dear author" or "Dear agent" letters that don't mention you or your agent or your manuscript by name.

Your agent should also involve you in the selection process without you asking, even if that just means telling you "I'm sending to this, that, and the other place." Don't let him/her send your gothic romance to a children's publisher, etc.

If you've been reading my other advice, you're already talking to other authors. If you know one who's made it into print, especially one who writes in your genre, ask which agent (and which publisher and editor) he used.

If your agent is sending your stuff to the right places and it's still getting rejected, you've done all you can do, except write better.