

The  
*Authors* Publish  
Guide to  
**MEMOIR**  
Writing and  
Publishing

Second Edition



Emily Harstone

The Authors Publish  
Guide to Memoir  
Writing and Publishing

Second Edition

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# Introduction

Memoirs have never been as popular as they are now. When I enter a bookstore, the display table in the front seems to be at least half covered in memoirs.

The most popular non-fiction writing over the past decade has been memoir, or contained an element of memoir, such as *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald. Even serious works of nonfiction, such as *How to Change Your Mind* by Michael Pollan, often contain memoir elements.

Still, many memoir writers struggle to get their work published. Authors think their life story, in and of itself, deserves attention, but that's not how it works. It's not just the story that matters but how you tell it.

Part of what novice writers struggle with is knowing exactly what a memoir is. They want it to cover their whole life, from birth to

current situation. That's not a memoir; it's an autobiography. Autobiographies aren't a popular genre, outside of celebrity autobiographies.

Instead of covering everything, a memoir focuses on a particular theme or aspect of your life. I've read memoirs about a father's love of wine, being raised in poverty, travel, loss, and friendship. I've even read a memoir about living with a Navy SEAL for a month.

There are memoirs out there about almost every aspect of the human experience—everything from being a hotel maid to participating in the Peace Corps to being Black and queer in America. It's a great way to get perspective on something that is outside of your lived experience.

When you work on turning your life story into a memoir, your first job will be to figure out and refine the theme and ideas that your book will contain.

That's just one of the elements of a memoir that I will talk about in this book. I will also talk about the best memoirs to read in terms of learning and craft. I will also share common mistakes you can avoid making while writing a memoir.

The rest of the book focuses on publishing a manuscript. I go into details about the submission process, list publishers open to direct submissions, talk about how to research agents, and even suggest some that are interested in memoirs.

Memoirs are interesting because, while they are nonfiction, they are pitched much like novels. Unlike most nonfiction, which you can pitch before you complete it, all memoirs must be completed before submitting.

Essay collections, which sometimes overlap, fall into the same category. They need not be completed before submitting, but they



are still generally thematically linked, and a lot of emphasis is placed on publishing some of the individual essays first.

# What to Figure Out Before You Start

Stephen King once wrote in his memoir that “the scariest moment is always just before you start. After that, things can only get better.” This is true, but I think this quote might lead a lot of writers to start jumping the gun (or jumping into the deep end).

For years, when I started to write a book, I just plunged into it. I had no real outline, no idea about the audience or the potential publisher. I just kept steadily writing one word after another.

Working for Authors Publish and writing ebooks really changed my perspective and my process. I have a clear, concrete audience in mind while writing ebooks, and having an outline makes writing these books so much easier.

It took me over a year to realize that I could apply the lessons I have learned while writing ebooks to other aspects of my writing life; I was so glad when I discovered this.

I am not saying that you should pick a publisher before you have written a single word; that's putting the cart before the horse. I am saying that you should keep in mind who your ideal audience is and how to best reach them, maybe by identifying a few ideal publishers.

I think determining who your audience is before you write is so important. When I write for Authors Publish, I know my readership; I interact with them via email all the time. Readers of my ebooks have written hundreds of reviews. I know what they like and what they don't. It helps me write books that connect with my readers.

After I started teaching courses on manuscript publishing, my feelings about knowing your audience in advance have only

grown. So many writers write without any idea of who their audience is, and because of that, they end up writing for “everyone,” which is to say they write for no one in particular. This often makes it harder to connect with their writing.

A good memoir is like sitting down in a coffee shop with a friend and having them tell you the most interesting story about their life. But writing for everyone often leads to this feeling of a stranger entering a coffee shop and shouting words for the whole room to hear.

A lot of writers start their memoirs with a vague idea of publishing them, but without any specific audience in mind. When they finish the memoir, they send it out to a few publishers, and then, more often than not, end up self-publishing it just for family and friends.

The memoir they wrote would be so much better if they went into it knowing who the intended audience was.

If they knew they were writing for family and friends only, they could be more personal. They would probably include different stories, ones that are more relevant to their audience. They might also leave out some stories that would be uncomfortable for family members to read.

One of the best memoirs I've ever read was self-published and intended for friends and family members only. It was a wonderful and lively read. Reading it felt intimate in the best possible way.

Not every book is intended to be published for all the world to read. It's much better to be intentional. Sure, your goal can shift over time—that's often how goals work—but it's much easier if you have an initial idea and impulse.

If your memoir is self-published, there are no issues in terms of it being an autobiography. After all, it doesn't need to meet the needs of a traditional publisher.

It is common for this sort of work to start out in early childhood and continue to cover your life up to the point you start writing it.

But traditionally published memoirs are much more focused, if not on a particular time period, then on a particular theme or idea.

If you are crafting a manuscript that will one day be available for most people to buy, you should have an ideal reader in mind. I feel like most of my favorite memoirs were written in that way.

For example, Ruth Reichl's *Garlic & Sapphires* is a book about what it's like to be an undercover food critic. I believe that the intended audience is, for lack of a better term, "foodies."

Even if you don't know much about food, *Garlic & Sapphires* is absorbing and readable, but the book, which has recipes throughout, is best for readers who love to cook and eat; such readers get an extra level of enjoyment.

Also—and I think this is particularly significant—the book is written with the assumption that the reader knows something about food. The difference in kinds of cheeses and knives, details like that are not explained.

I think this is important because the reader feels like they are reading “insider’s knowledge” this way. It’s better to have to look up a few easily Googleable things than to feel like you’re being spoken down to.

When a memoir has a specific reader, it also makes it easier to market. For example, there are a lot of wonderful memoirs written by runners about running. I am not the target audience (although I have read at least three of these memoirs), but the target audience very much exists.

Memoirs about running are not just sold at bookstores and online but at various other places. I’ve encountered them at sporting goods stores and at national park stores.

Often, these books are not just about running; they generally talk about other aspects of the writer's life too, sometimes just in small asides, but other times in focused and deliberate ways.

Yet, because the author focuses on running, they were able to have a niche audience from the very start.

These writers are able to give readings not only at bookstores, but at running stores and athletic events, expanding their ability to sell the book.

When you start to think about what you want to write about, focus on the individual stories that make up your life story. How do these stories connect with larger themes? How does this theme connect with an audience? Sometimes, when you think about it like this, it's obvious what your memoir should focus on.



Other times, it's not so clear. Maybe there is more than one theme or idea you really want to focus on. Maybe you have really great stories about being in your early twenties on a police force and about being a writer in your late forties, but the intervening decades are dull and not worth writing about.

Often you have to make hard decisions in terms of what you are going to write about. One of the ways to make these decisions is to write down a potential theme or period during your life as a heading and then bullet point some of the stories you'd tell that go along with that theme. If you can come up with a lot of stories relating to one theme, it is probably worth pursuing.

Also, keep in mind who might be the potential audience for the type of book you are considering. For example, if you wrote about your years as a junior figure skating champion, you might already have a built-in audience. Although, it might be hard to grow your audience beyond that niche.

A memoir about caregiving for a relative with Alzheimer's might already have a strong audience made up of other caregivers, but it's how you write that story that gives you traction beyond your ideal reader base.

For example, one of my thirty-year-old brother's favorite books last year was about ballet. He has zero interest in ballet, but someone who loved ballet told him about the memoir, and because of how well the story was written, he read the whole thing and told others about it.

I think it's important to write a memoir about what interests you and other people. For example, when I tell personal stories, everyone wants to hear about my crazy high school (for example, the vice principal's office was in a bank vault). However, I personally don't want to talk about that period in my life. I would never ever write a memoir focusing on high school for that reason.

But when I tell certain stories about my family, everyone is interested, myself included, I know that I could never write about them in that way, because it would be impossible to do so in a way where my family's privacy wouldn't be invaded.

Natalie Diaz is a poet whose first book *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, is deeply personal, even though it's poetry not memoir.

There is a photograph of her brother, although not the brother she primarily writes about, on the cover. Before it was released to the public Diaz shared the contents of the book with her extended family. There were a lot of protests, and some conflicting memories, apparently, but everyone seemed to accept their fate – they were all to be immortalized in print.

Some authors try to get around gaining the approval of family members by choosing a pen name. I can see why that option appeals to people, but I also know it's often not the right choice.

It's much easier to promote your own work under your own name. You already start out with a built-in audience of family, friends, and acquaintances. When you write under a pen name, you have to start from scratch.

Also, with the memoir genre, more than fiction and other genres, it helps readers to know who the author actually is. Whenever my mom finishes a memoir that she enjoys, she looks up the author online and listens to them talk. She wants to hear what they sound like in real life.

But it goes beyond that. If you ever become successful with a pen name, the situation can become tricky. One of my favorite authors writes under the pen name Elena Ferrante. Another author managed to find out who they actually were and revealed their identity to the world.

When that happened, Elena Ferrante got a lot more exposure than she would have otherwise, but in a very uncomfortable way.

Thankfully, a lot of people blamed the writer of the article who revealed her identity to the world.

So, even if your work started out in secret, it might not stay that way.

Picking the right theme for your memoir can help ensure your privacy, even while you publish under your own name. You can steer your work away from writing about anything you might be uncomfortable sharing publicly.

Once you pick your memoir's theme or span of time, it's good to know that there will be tangents, little sections that won't fit the theme as perfectly; that's fine and natural. Focused memoirs still include other moments and details from your life, although it's important to curate these to make sure they don't overwhelm the theme or derail the points made by focusing on a certain time period.

I've had friends whose first draft of a memoir was unfocused, in terms of theme, and then over a period of years, they carved it down into something that had a theme that was easy to articulate. This is something you can do as well, although I would caution against it on general principle. It took my friends a lot longer to write that way.

## A Memoir Writer's Reading List

As a writer, I'm a firm believer that you should also be a reader. I think the best way to learn the craft of writing is to read.

I also believe that it's important to be well read in your chosen genre. It's easier to pick up the tools of that genre if you are reading books written in that genre.

Many of the rules of fiction are not applicable to non-fiction, for example. So, while it's good to read fiction in general, only by reading the memoirs of others will you get better at writing your own.

You might have already read numerous memoirs on all sorts of subjects, but if you haven't, I'm providing this carefully curated list of memoirs to get you started.

Now, this list reflects my personal taste, for the most part, but I have included a number of memoirs that I didn't particularly love but that I still think are important to read and well worth your time.

When I was putting together this list, I tried to think of it from several different angles. I didn't just want to provide contemporary memoirs (though it was important to include them), because I think that it's equally important to read the classic memoirs that made the genre what it is today.

I also included a few more unusual or unpopular memoirs because I thought they captured something important, either in terms of writing to a niche audience or exploring an idea that isn't often explored.

I did not include all the memoirs I have loved or admired. I didn't want to overwhelm you. But I did try to cover a lot of them.



The list is in no particular order. I tried only to include books I don't mention anywhere else in this book.

[On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King](#)

I'm not a huge fan of Stephen King. When I was sixteen and thoughtful adults started gifting me this book because I wanted to be a writer, I was a little offended, which is absurd, because this book, particularly the first half, which focuses more on memoir than craft, is wonderful. It's surprising and detailed and helpful in every way.

I've known a lot of non-writers who've read this book and loved it. It's one of those books that was written with a specific audience in mind and manages to connect with people outside of that audience.

[The Liar's Club by Mary Karr](#)

*The New York Times* is not alone in giving credit to this memoir for starting the modern memoir boom. Even though it's not a personal favorite, I can see why it is so well liked. It's a memoir

about an unusual childhood with unusual parents. This is the childhood memoir so many other books try to be. A must read for any inspiring memoirist.

[Autobiography of a Face by Lucy Greal](#)

Another classic memoir that is given credit for the modern boom, *Autobiography of a Face* is also about childhood. But instead of being about the kind of wild childhood Karr had, it is about having cancer while growing up. It is also a meditation on physical appearances. Greal lost most of the bottom half of her face to cancer, and that not only altered her physical appearance but also made simple things like eating and drinking difficult.

[Truth & Beauty: A Friendship by Anne Patchett](#)

A favorite memoir of mine, *Truth & Beauty* is an ode to female friendship and to being a writer. Patchett is best friends with Lucy Greal. They met in undergrad and became close in graduate school. *Truth & Beauty* is an interesting book to read after *Autobiography* because it partially explores the aftereffects of the

success of *Autobiography* on Grealy. It is also a great examination of what it takes to make it as a writer. I personally greatly prefer it to *Autobiography* (but that may just be me).

[The Color of Water by James McBride](#)

A complex and emotional memoir about childhood and how race, religion, and poverty intersect. This is well told and surprising. It is easy to read and get absorbed in. It was published in 1996 and is a classic for the best reasons.

[How to Write an Autobiographical Novel by Alexander Chee](#)

Not a how to guide for anything, particularly, but a wonderful, engaging, and well written collection of essays about writing, identity, and life. A collection of essays has a lot in common with a memoir and can also be an alternative/variation on them. Other essay collections I particularly like are [They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us](#) by Hanif Abdurraqib and [Tomboyland](#) by Melissa Faliveno

*Why Be Happy, When You Could be Normal?* by Jeanette

Winterson

Another memoir about childhood and, more specifically, terrible mothers. This well-crafted memoir about childhood, being adopted, and sexuality is complex and well written. It was published in 2012 and I feel like it's profoundly influenced a lot of the newer memoirs about childhood.

*The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls

Without question, a favorite memoir of mine. Another memoir of childhood and crazy mothers, but is somehow distinctly different from the very start, which, in this case, has Walls in a cab on the way to a fancy event in Manhattan when she spots her mother dumpster diving in an alley.

*Tender at the Bone* by Ruth Reichel

Ruth Reichel's memoir, which is very much about her relationship with food and people, starts out with her mother's terrible and

terrifying cooking and progresses all the way towards her becoming a professional reviewer of food.

This is a masterfully written memoir, funny and heartbreaking, and the audience is focused but open to more readers.

[What I Talk About When I Talk About Running by Haruki](#)

[Murakami](#)

This memoir focuses on running and writing. The personal life of Murakami is mentioned, but only in passing. It is never the focus and it doesn't really seem to be where Murakami's interest lies.

While not my favorite personally, I think it is a great memoir that doesn't disclose much about the person itself. Additionally, it has a niche audience (runners), but it also appeals to a wider one. Even my mother loved it.

[The Distance Between Us by Reyna Grande](#)

A wonderfully written, vital memoir of growing up (mostly) in the United States with parents who were defined by their home

country, Mexico. It is a deeply personal story, one that intersects well with larger cultural issues.

[Just Kids by Patti Smith](#)

*Just Kids* focuses on the friendship/relationship of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe. It documents their journey as lovers/friends and artists during a vital period of artistic growth in New York City. It features cameos of almost everyone famous at the time and the Chelsea Hotel plays an important role.

[Men We Reaped by Jasmyn Ward](#)

A memoir that focuses on the loss of men in Ward's life. The book explores race and poverty in detailed and thoughtful ways, and it has influenced, I feel, a lot of more recent memoirs.

[Living with a SEAL by Jesse Itzler](#)

This is the most lighthearted contribution to this list. I'm not going to say it's well written (it isn't), but I couldn't put it down, and I couldn't stop laughing. I think that aspect of the book, in and of

itself, can be very helpful to learn from. This memoir is mostly about a man who thinks of himself as fit (Itzler) and has his life transformed by a Navy SEAL (Dave Goggins).

[The Unlikely Disciple by Kevin Roose](#)

This book is also more mainstream, but not as lighthearted. It involves Roose, a student at Brown, attending Liberty College, one of the most conservative Christian colleges in the United States. It is focused on the adventures and experiences he has during his one year at Liberty. It's a book I didn't expect to love but did. Part of why it is on this list is because it focuses on a very specific period of time—that year—rather than trying to cover a whole childhood.

[When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi](#)

This memoir is heartbreakingly beautiful. It is about a doctor who wants to be a writer and is terminally ill. He has a wife he loves, and in spite of the odds, they decide to have a child together.

There's many meta elements to this story, but it is so well told.

[\*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius\* by Dave Eggers](#)

A genre-defining memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is about Dave Eggers becoming the steward of his brother after his parents pass away within weeks of each other, but it also very much explores the time period the story is set in (the 90s). The writing style is over the top and unignorable.

[\*Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir\* by Natasha Trethewey](#)

A wonderful recent memoir about the bond between mothers and daughters, family, loss, and trauma. Beautifully written, Trethewey's poetic roots shine through.

[\*In the Dream House\* by Carmen Maria Machado](#)

A strong and inventive memoir about an abusive relationship between the author and her former girlfriend. I love how many literary tropes influence and are influenced by this work of non-fiction.



# Common Mistakes to Avoid Making

All genres have common traps that are easy to fall into while writing. With the memoir genre, I believe the biggest potential traps are curation, organization, telling instead of showing, and not telling a story well. Let's review each of these criteria closely.

## **Curation**

When I say curation, I'm referring to the act of choosing what to include and what to leave out. While it's tempting to just write it all down, that's not how you make something interesting. It's important to figure out what is most relevant and what lends little value to the book.

It can be overwhelming at first, and sometimes you have to write down information that is not particularly relevant in order to remember relevant information, but it is easier if you curate before

you type. For the most part, this requires deciding on what you are going to write about beforehand.

I talked a lot about picking a theme or time period earlier, but curation is more complicated than that. Sometimes, not all the stories you have that fit the time period or theme work well within the central arc of the story.

For example, some stories might be redundant. They might have too much in common with other stories that fit the memoir better, and the memoir as a whole might be stronger without them.

Other stories might fit the theme but complicate the storyline as a whole. These also are not helpful and should not be included.

In fiction writing, there's a well-known phrase: "kill your darlings." A variation of this phrase has been in use for hundreds of years. This means that you may have to remove the part of the

story or line that you love the most, particularly because it might interfere with the readers' point of view.

So, if you don't know what to remove, look for your darlings, and if you don't trust yourself, find someone who you do trust to provide feedback on what should go.

Curation is about how the book comes together as a whole. Writing a book is not about the individual parts, but the sum of them.

Curation is vital because a memoir is about taking your life story and turning a portion of it into something accessible and understandable by others.

## **Organization**

Organization is also important when it comes to writing a memoir. In life, time moves in a linear fashion; one moment follows another. Writers often try to write memoirs, particularly their first

drafts, like this—one story following another in the same sequence as they occurred in real life.

This is linear storytelling and it rarely works out as well as one expects it to. There's a couple of issues here that are impossible to ignore.

One is that our memories are unreliable. Everyone likes to think they have a good memory, and I have a reputation for having a particularly good one, but the other day my baby was fussy all night, and my husband and myself were really put through the ringer.

The next morning, we had a loud discussion about what actually happened the night before in terms of baby care and sleeping times, and only later in the day did I realize that he was in the right, based on the rather strange place I found my pillow.

Keep in mind that these events occurred the night before, not years or decades earlier. Sometimes, events happen so far in the distant past that it's hard to wrangle all the details.

Now, you might say that unreliable memories throw a whole memoir into doubt, and yes, they do sometimes add an element of doubt.

*Educated* by Tara Westover takes this doubt head on by including at the end of the book and embedding throughout the perspective of other members of her family about certain events.

But for the most part, readers trust the writers to present their version of the story, and that is enough.

My main point is this: presenting memories in an actual sequential manner, unless the memoir took place over a fixed period of time (*Wild* by Cheryl Strayed is a good example of this) is difficult.

Linear also isn't always the best way to go because stories that build on each other in terms of themes and ideas can end up being separated by huge chunks of time if they are presented sequentially instead of thematically.

I see this happen a lot in unpublished memoir manuscripts; usually by the time it's published, an editor has helped curate and clump the sections. This is particularly clear in books like *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance.

No matter what, even in published memoirs there are redundancies and sequential awkwardness that occurs. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller is a prime example of an excellent memoir that still struggles with redundancies and sequential issues (particularly near the end).

But if you begin by ordering your work in a deliberate way and re-ordering when needed, it can really help make your manuscript easier to publish.

It's fine to start your manuscript in sequential order, but as you revise it, don't stay married to that order; try other structures.

One of my favorite ways to structure a memoir is a mix of linear or not. This is where stories are loosely grouped into various time periods, but the events within that period follow themes and ideas, rather than a linear timeline.

I think it's easier to get absorbed in the story that way. But that might be a matter of personal preference and could depend on the type of story you are trying to tell.

### **Telling a Story Well**

The final trap many authors fall into is related to telling not showing, although it can be more than just that. It is the trap of not telling a story very well.

There's an assumption made by most authors that their life story is inherently interesting no matter how they tell it or show it.

This is not the case. Even showing rather than telling a story doesn't automatically make it interesting.

It's not just the information contained in the story but the way the story is conveyed. For example, if you manage to inject a moment of humor into an otherwise serious story, the story as a whole is stronger for it.

Pacing is key. Some authors try and convey as much information as quickly as possible, because that's how they think the audience will stay hooked into the story, but without the right pacing, and sharing the right details at certain points, readers are unlikely to connect with the story as a whole.



Phrasing matters a lot too. When asked how I met my husband, I often say that the most interesting part of the story is not how we met, but how we didn't meet.

The right phrasing can make a story much more engaging and realistic. It can up the emotional impact on the reader and the engagement the reader has from the story.

I think so much can be learned from telling a story out loud to friends.

There are stories I've told a lot in my life—the story of how I met (or didn't meet) my husband, the story of how my feet being run over by a car was a good thing, etc.

Each time I have told these stories, I have paid close attention to how the person I'm telling the story to reacts. I try to note in my head where they laugh, where they seem the most engaged, and when they seem the most disinterested.

Each time I tell a story, I try to re-calibrate it. I preserve the funny bits, the bits that have their full attention, and I cut or rephrase the parts that don't seem to connect with an audience.

If the listener asks any clarifying questions, I make sure to integrate the answer of that question into the story itself the next time I tell it.

The reason I pay so much attention to the way I tell a story is not because I plan to write a memoir one day, but by learning to tell my own stories better, I can learn a lot more about how to craft fiction that connects with an audience.

I got the idea from the *New York Times* best-selling author and vlogger John Green. As a longtime fan of his, I had heard him talk about how much you can learn from telling a story out loud, but more significantly, I remember seeing that action in practice.

In his first novel, *Looking for Alaska*, there's a very funny prank at the crux of the novel. Years earlier, when he was still an undergraduate, John Green was filmed by a friend telling a version of that prank story, because unlike most of the novel, it had actually happened in real life.

It was an interesting and telling experience to compare the prank story he told in college to the way he told it in the novel. It was funny to see what had changed and what had stayed the same.

With memoir writing, this is even more directly applicable. I will never write a scene in one of my novels about being run over a car, but most of your significant moments will probably be distilled in a memoir.

When you are telling a story that plays an important role in your memoir, keep an eye on your "audience." Try to figure out what works and what doesn't. Your story will be so much stronger for it.

# How to Make Your Memoir More Appealing

Below are some helpful ways to increase the odds of your memoir being published. I'm not saying you have to follow all of this feedback in order to find a publisher, but try to find the points that connect with you and your work.

## **Publish Sections in Literary Journals**

I always encourage writers to place work in literary journals before trying to get full-length work published. This is true regardless of what genre you write, but in my experience, it is most true for short stories, poetry, and memoirs.

Now, some memoirs like *If Only You People Could Follow Directions* by Jessica Hendry Nelson or any of David Sedaris' many books are actually structured in a way where it's easy to

publish the individual chapters because they are comprised entirely of essays. This doesn't work for all writers or all stories.

Still, most memoirs have chapters you can take out and publish as narrative non-fiction in one of the many journals seeking that kind of work. You should parse your own work for chapters that more or less stand on their own. You can also revise them a little to better stand on their own if needed.

Publishing a section of your still unpublished memoir online or in electronic literary journals or magazines can really help you find a traditional publisher or an agent for that work. Many small presses and agencies read literary journals and magazines seeking authors.

Many authors, including Elizabeth Gilbert of *Eat Pray Love* fame, found their agents this way.

But it's not just about publishers or agents finding you. Having a publication history, and particularly having a popular essay or

article published, can really help boost your query letter and your author platform. It's a way to find potential buyers for your book long before you publish it.

If you are not sure how to submit to literary journals, [here](#) is a good place to start.

Other authors take a different approach to this; instead of publishing in journals, they start by blogging about their experience. A lot of books and book deals have come about this way, but it's also tricky because if your blog doesn't do well, it can be very difficult to turn it into a traditionally published book.

*Let's Pretend this Never Happened* by Jenny Lawson, who got her start as "The Bloggeress," is a good example of doing this successfully, as is *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously* by Julie Powell.

## **Build an Author Platform**

An author platform is your position as a writer, not just in terms of social media, but in terms of real life connections and associations.

More publishers and agents are asking for writers to talk about their author platforms as part of the query letter, and more small presses and agents are approaching authors that already have platforms.

Chantelle Atkins has written a great article for us on creating an author platform that you can read [here](#).

A blog is very much a part of an author platform, but it's optional, and it is rare for it now to be the only component. Most authors have various components such as Facebook and a writing group that make up this author platform.

## **Be Familiar with Comparable Titles**

I have talked a lot about reading other memoirs to help inform and craft your own, and I've mentioned a wide range of memoirs as part of that discussion.

However, it's also important to read titles that are comparable to yours. Look specifically for memoirs that have a lot in common with yours in terms of theme or style.

This is important because you need to know the competition.

These are the books that agents and informed readers will compare your book against. These are also the books that might help you navigate writing your own memoir; you can learn from the other authors' successes and from their mistakes.

It's also very helpful to mention one or two comparable titles in your query letter. Ideally, these comparable titles will have been published within the previous two years. This can really help an agent know what they are looking at before they start to read your memoir.



# The Submission Process

For a long time, submitting seemed strange and mysterious to me.

It seemed too overwhelming to actually do.

In fact, for the most part, submitting is relatively easy.

Most publishers want the same two things: a query letter and a synopsis. They also expect an excerpt of your book, generally the first two chapters.

While there are specific requirements that differ from publisher to publisher and from agency to agency, it is good to have a basic query letter and synopsis that you modify to meet the needs of the given agent or publisher. Just make sure you send the correct version to the right person; it really annoys a publisher to receive submissions with another publisher's name on it. The same goes for agents.

You should spend a lot of time and consideration crafting the query letter. This is the first impression you will make on agents and publishers. [This article](#) is very helpful to read before starting your query letter.

It is important to note that many publishers expect information about your author platform or marketing plan. Don't know where to start in terms of an author platform? [Building an Author Platform](#) by Chantelle Atkins is a great place to start.

If you meet a publisher or an agent directly at a conference, most want you to deliver a pitch. A pitch can also be handy to include in your cover letter. Don't know what a pitch is? [This article](#) talks about what a pitch is, and more importantly, how to make a good one. [This article](#) goes into even more detail. I always include my pitch in my cover letter.

Not all publishers and agents require a synopsis, but many do. Most want a complete synopsis of the plot that fits on one page. By complete synopsis, I mean that they want spoilers. They also

generally want information about character development. [This article](#) focuses on how to craft a synopsis.

It should go without saying, but edit and polish the query letter and synopsis. If you can afford an editor, get them to review the query letter, the synopsis, and also the first twenty pages. Twice. Or more. The first twenty pages of the novel are all that most agents and many publishers will initially see, so make sure they are compelling and error free.

You should also make sure that your manuscript is correctly formatted. [This article](#) focuses on that topic.

M.J. Moores interviewed a literary agent, an editor, and a published author to gather the top reasons most manuscripts are rejected. Her article, [The Top Three Reasons Most Manuscripts Get Rejected](#), should be read before you begin the submission process.

Once you have completed a query letter and a synopsis that you are happy with, start to research where you are going to submit your book. You can start your research earlier if you want.

You should decide early on if you want to submit directly to publishers or if you want to submit to an agent.

If you are focusing on finding an agent, you should read the article [The Safest Way to Search For an Agent](#) before proceeding. [This article](#) on how to find, research, and evaluate literary agents is also very helpful. One of the best free reputable search engines for agents is [Agent Query](#). You can start looking for an agent there.

If you are looking at submitting a manuscript directly to a publisher, our [index of manuscript publishers](#) is a good place to start. We always check watchdog sites before reviewing a publisher.

Remember, there is no such thing as a legitimate traditional publisher that charges its writers. You should be paid by your publisher, not the other way around.

[This article will help you know what to look for when examining a publisher's website.](#)

Some publishers will respond to submissions within weeks, others within years, so keep that in mind. If you have not heard from a publisher in six months, you should email them to ask about the status of the manuscript, unless their website explicitly says that they will take longer to review.

Once you find agents or publishers that you feel would be a good fit, you should check and double check their submission guidelines. [This article](#) is a great reminder of how and why following the guidelines is so important.

Most publishers accept electronic submissions through email or a submission manager, but a few still require submissions through the post. Either way, the publisher's submission guidelines should walk you through the steps. The same goes for agents.

It is important not to submit to an agent or publisher if they say they are closed to unsolicited submissions. Your manuscript will

not be read, and in all likelihood, you will annoy the person or persons who receive it, which could hurt your chances in the future.

## Publishers Open to Direct Submissions

The last time I attended a writer's conference, I attended a panel that was made up of agents and editors. There was an interesting disconnect between the agents and the editor who worked for a Big Five publisher.

That editor said they really wanted to read and publish more memoirs. They stressed that memoirs were selling really well at that point.

The agents actually looked a little shocked. Both agents on the panel represented a number of memoir writers, and they both thought the market was cooling, maybe not in terms of selling books to the public, but in terms of finding publishers to publish these books in the first place.

It was the only moment of disagreement between the agents and publishers during the entire panel and I found it rather fascinating.

Because of that, you would think that there would be more publishers of memoirs that are open to direct submissions, but there are actually surprisingly few. It's one of the genres where it is generally much easier to find a publisher with an agent.

Some of the publishers on this list are old and respected, while others are new and still figuring things out.

Not all the publishers on this list are currently open to submissions, but most are.

### [Persea Books](#)

Persea Books is an independent book publisher based out of New York that was established in the 1970s. Since then, they have gained a reputation for publishing thoughtful books in a variety of literary genres, including memoir.

### [Chicago Review Press](#)

Chicago Review Press was founded over 40 years ago. They are an established independent publisher of literary fiction and non-



fiction. They were founded by Curt Matthews and his wife, Linda Matthews. Curt was the former editor of the literary journal the Chicago Review. Their imprint Academy Chicago publishes memoirs and is open to unsolicited submissions.

### [City Lights Books](#)

City Lights Books is based out of San Francisco and is indeed part of the famous bookstore there. City Lights Books was started by the famous poet and writer Lawrence Ferlinghetti. They are most often linked to the beat poetry movement. They have published New York Times best-selling books and have been a publisher for over 60 years. They publish about a dozen books each year, including a number of memoirs.

### [Three Rooms Press](#)

Three Rooms Press is an independent press that is inspired by “Dada, Punk, and Passion”. They were founded in 1994. They have good distribution. As one can see by their tagline, they have a very clear sense of what they like and what they are interested in

publishing. They publish fiction, nonfiction (including memoirs), and YA.

### [Arcade Publishing](#)

Arcade Publishing is an imprint of [Skyhorse Publishing](#), a large independent publisher with a number of imprints. Arcade publishes fiction and nonfiction, including memoir.

### [Coffeetown Press](#)

Coffeetown Press is a literary and nonfiction imprint owned by Epicenter Press. They primarily publish nonfiction, as well as memoir, literary fiction, and historical fiction.

### [Bancroft Press](#)

Bancroft Press is a small press that publishes a wide variety of work, both nonfiction and fiction. They publish memoirs and legal dramas and everything in between. They usually publish between three and five books a year, so while they are open to a wide range of work, they actually publish very little.

### [Allen & Unwin](#)

Allen & Unwin is a large independent Australian Press that is open to submissions on a wide range of topics. They have won a number of Australian publisher awards. They accept based on pitches, and have a system known as the "Friday Pitch" which ensures that at least one editor reviews each unsolicited pitch.

### [SourceBooks](#)

A large independent publisher based out of Illinois, they also have offices in Connecticut and New York. Source books was started in 1987 by Dominique Racciah. They also have several imprints, all founded within the last decade. They publish a lot of nonfiction, including memoir.

### [Schaffner Press](#)

Schaffner is an established press with distribution through IPG. They publish literary fiction, short fiction collections, and crime fiction. They also publish a wide variety of nonfiction including memoir, autobiography, biography, journalistic expose or narrative, true crime, art, culture, pop culture, world history,

current events, science, and music.

### [Clash Books](#)

Clash Books started in 2015, they also publish Clash Magazine and the literary journal Black Telephone Magazine. They publish fiction, nonfiction (including memoir), and poetry.

### [Vine Leaves Press](#)

Vine Leaves Press is an international press with staff in the United States, Germany, Greece, England, and beyond. They were founded in 2011 as a literary journal and started publishing vignette collections in 2014. Vine Leaves Press publishes books in a variety of genres including memoirs, coming of age, literary and multi-genre novels, poetry and short story collections, and reference books. If you sign up for their email newsletter on their [landing page](#) you are sent a digital sampler of past publications.

### [Santa Monica Press](#)

Santa Monica Press was established in 1993 and initially focused only on publishing nonfiction with a focus on regional books.

They've since expanded, and they now publish within the follow categories: biography & memoir, California, film, theater & TV, humor, music, pop culture, reference & social sciences, sports, travel, as well as young adult fiction (historical fiction only), and young adult narrative nonfiction (both contemporary and historical narrative nonfiction).

### [Propertius Pres](#)

Propertius Press is a small non-profit press located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. They have been around since 2014 and have a large staff listed but everyone appears to be mostly part-time. They publish paperbacks and electronic books.

### [Pan Macmillan Australia](#)

Pan Macmillan Australia is open to direct submissions. They are the Australian imprint of Macmillan, one of the big five publishers. This is the only way to submit to Macmillan directly. They have excellent distribution in Australia. They publish commercial fiction including women's fiction, romance, thriller, crime, historical, humor, paranormal, fantasy, as well as literary fiction and

nonfiction, children's and young adult books, and commercial nonfiction ranging from memoir to diet.

### [Thread](#)

Thread is a new nonfiction imprint from [Bookouture](#) which is owned by Hachette. Thread was launched in March 2020. Thread focuses on a wide range of topics including self-development, personal finance, parenting, and as they phrase it, "inspirational memoir". They talk about the first five titles they published [here](#). It's helpful to review that list to get a feel for what they are interested in publishing.

### [Roxane Gay Books](#)

Roxane Gay Books is a new imprint of Grove Atlantic. Roxane Gay has written about this new imprint [here](#). Roxane Gay is the award-winning and bestselling author of a number of books including *Hunger* and *Bad Feminist*. This new imprint will publish nonfiction, memoir, novels, and short story collections.

### [Tin House](#)

Tin House is an established and respected small press. They recently brought on one Hanif Abdurraqib as their Editor-at-Large, and he will acquire three non-fiction books a year for them. For the first time they will have three open reading periods a year. The first is from September 4-9th and it will be nonfiction only, including memoirs and graphic nonfiction.

### [Blair](#)

Blair is a nonprofit press combining the lists of Carolina Wren Press and John F. Blair, Publisher. To submit unsolicited fiction, memoir, or poetry, you must do so through their contests. They have historically been free with an option to donate.

# How to Research Agents

Researching agents can be a time-consuming process, but I would never submit to an agent without first doing significant research.

To me, research is the most important step of the submission process. It is vital, because there is no point going through all the work of writing your manuscript and submitting it, just to end up with an agent that does not properly represent you or your manuscript.

An agent who could be a good fit for another author or even another one of your manuscripts might not be the right agent for this particular project.

Just like any other industry, there are bad agents out there that could misrepresent you in any number of ways. [Writer Beware](#) (a volunteer organization that works on behalf of writers) has a terrific section on [dishonest agents](#).



It is important to note that many agents do not work alone, and most of the more successful agents, although not all, are part or head of a larger agency.

When submitting to an agency you often submit to individual agents that work there. Sometimes the agency is very established, but the agents within that agency that are open to unsolicited submissions are the newer ones. All of these are important factors to consider when the time comes to submit.

I would say that I dismiss over half the agents I research in the genre I write in after researching them. Or I put them in a document on my computer with notes about what I liked and didn't like about them to review for potential submission at a later date. In other words, I would consider submitting to them, but only after a significant number of rejections from more established agents.

### **How to Find Potential Agents**

The first step of researching agents is always the same. It involves finding agents who are worth looking into further. I usually start

with a genre search on [Query Tracker](#). This is the way many authors find the agents who end up representing them. This search engine has plenty of filters, so it is easy to look for agents who focus on your genre of writing.

Although, you should always verify by other means that they actually do focus on that genre before submitting. You also need to verify elsewhere that they are a legitimate agency.

Another method, and the one with which I personally have found the best leads, is to read books in the same genre that you write in, and when you find a book or an author you like, figure out who their agent is. Often, the agent is specifically thanked in the acknowledgements section of the book, but if they are not, googling the name of the author and the word “agent” will often find good results as well.

I also use [Absolute Write Water Cooler Forum](#) to find agents. I usually look just by browsing the “Agents and Publishers” forum. I always keep my eye out for the longer threads spanning multiple

pages; that is generally a good sign with agents (less so with publishers).

Another way to find an agent is through attending literary conferences. Agents often attend these conferences, and there are various ways to communicate with them or pitch to them during the conference. If you are attending a conference specifically to seek agents, research the agents beforehand to see if you would actually want to work with them (and they with you—most agents focus on a specific genre). Also, approach with caution any sessions where they are charging you an additional fee to pitch.

Also, if you can afford it, it can very much be worth your time to subscribe to [Publisher's Marketplace](#). Agents share information there about the sales they've made, and how much money was involved in the advance, approximately. It's easy to find out which agents represent certain authors there, and to see who is actively successfully selling memoirs to publishers. You can pay for temporary passes if you don't want to become a subscriber.

## **How to Research an Agent Outside of their Website**

You can also learn a lot about the agent or agency just by browsing their website, but I always research the agent outside their website first. Visiting the website first can color your perspective too much.

I already mentioned [Absolute Write Water Cooler Forum](#) above as a potential way to find agents, but the way I primarily use it is to vet agents. The forums are active and get a lot of use. If an author has a good or bad experience with an agent, they often will share it. Other people in the industry also chime in. Victoria Strauss, the co-founder of *Writer Beware*, is active there.

Because it is a forum and everyone can post, you sometimes have to take entries with a grain of salt. But there is a lot of good information to be found there. If an agent or agency isn't discussed there, it is usually because they are new, small, or not very active, and that itself can be a clear sign, although there are exceptions.

Doing a Google search of the agency or agent is also good. A write-up in [Publishers Weekly](#) can be a good thing, but they also write a lot of “puff pieces” about agents and publishing houses, so

I try not to take them too seriously. [Wikipedia](#), as most people already know, is not generally a trustworthy source in this area either. One of the things that is valuable is that sometimes the agent is mentioned on author websites (helpful), or the agency is maligned on [Glassdoor](#) (not a good sign). [Publisher's Marketplace](#) is a good resource if you are paying for a subscription.

It is very important to make sure the agency isn't on the [Writer Beware Thumbs Down Agencies](#) List. At this point, I almost have the list memorized.

### **How to Evaluate an Agent's Website**

A lot can be learned from the agent's website itself. An established and reputable agent will have the names of at least some of the authors and books they have represented right on their website. It is important that these books and names are currently relevant. For example, if they only mention representing one or two authors that were successful 20 years ago but have not published in a decade, these agents are to be avoided, generally.

But the best indicator of a legitimate agency that could place your book with a good publisher, in my experience, is their track record: the authors that they work with and the books they represent.

It is very important that an agent be active in the genre that you hope to publish in. If they are not, they do not understand how that genre works and often don't have the relevant connections that will help your book be considered by the right publishers. If they say they accept your genre but have not represented any books in that genre, I would approach with caution.

It is a good sign if an agent is a member of the Association of Authors Representatives (AAR). That in and of itself is not a stamp of approval though; it is just an indicator that they are probably competent. It's important to remember that not all good agents are AAR members, and I wouldn't eliminate an agent just because they are not a member.

New agents can be good, although they are more of a risk because they don't have a track record. However, you should only consider submitting to a new agent if they have industry experience ([more](#)

[on that here](#)). They should make it very clear what experience they have on their website.

An agent should never charge an upfront fee. That is a clear indicator that they are not a legitimate agent. The same goes for agents who offer editing services for a fee. A combination editor/agent website is usually a clear warning sign, although those lines are starting to blur.

A number of successful agents now run publishing companies and/or have editing services. If that is the case, ideally, these different businesses will remain separate. For example, an author taken on by the agent will not be offered a contract by that agent's publishing company or be encouraged to use that agent's paid editorial services. Sometimes, this multi-business approach is clear on the agent's site itself, while other times, [Absolute Write Water Cooler Forum](#) is where it is mentioned. If it is talked about on the forum, it is usually clear whether the agency manages to run multiple businesses in a legitimate way or not. Always look for fees and signs of multiple businesses or redirection on the website.

## **In Conclusion**

Researching agents might seem overwhelming at first, but the good news is that the more you do it, the easier it becomes. Spending a lot of time researching agents helps, but so does spending time increasing your base of knowledge by reading [Writers Beware](#). One picks up warning signs much quicker as one's base of knowledge expands.

Because it is important to keep track of the research one does, not to mention the submissions one makes, I have two files on my computer devoted to agents and publishers. One includes notes about the agents and publishers I am considering submitting to, as well as a list of agencies and publishers I do not want to consider in the future. The other file tracks my submissions to agents and publishers. It indicates the responses I have received and how long it took to receive them. If I received a request for a full manuscript before receiving a rejection, I make sure to indicate that as well. These two files help the submission process immensely.



## Potential Agents & Agencies

I have talked a lot about researching agents, and I think this is an important skill set to have. In the past, I have very much steered clear of recommending individual agents, and even now I am leery to do so, but I want to include the information for a small number of literary agents that represent the memoir genre so that you can get a feel for what you are looking for when researching.

I am not suggesting you submit to these agents because I have never read your work and I have no idea whether it will be a good fit for them or not, but I want you to be able to see what a legitimate agent looks like and how they represent what they are looking for. This is just a jumping off point. Treat it as such.

Not all the agents are currently open to direct submissions, although the majority are. This list is in no particular order.

All of the agencies listed here have been researched and vetted using the methods outlined in the previous chapter.

Please keep in mind that if an agent does not represent your kind of memoir, you should not submit it to them, even if they are legitimate. It is a waste of both your time and the agent's time.

Often, if a literary agent knows your manuscript is not the right fit for them but they think that it might work for another agent at the same agency, they share within the agency. If they don't think it is a good fit for the agency as a whole, they reject it. Never submit to more than one agent at the same agency, unless they expressly ask you to do so.

**Ayesha Pande** is a boutique, New York-based literary agency. They represent a lot of memoir authors, and a number of their agents represent memoir, including Ayeshe Pande, Anjali Singh, and Stephany Evans. Each have different areas of focus.

Represented authors include Peggy Shinner, Lynda Schuster, and Raquel Cepeda. You can learn more [here](#).

**Neon Literary** is a small agency that represents a lot of respected memoir writers and essayists. You can learn more [here](#).

**Cooke McDermid Literary Management** represents a wide variety of memoir's, including food memoirs. You can learn more about what their individual agents are seeking [here](#).

**DeFiore & Company** is a respected and established agency that has a number of agents who represent memoir. You can learn more [here](#).

**Victoria Sanders & Associates** is an established literary agency co-founded by Victoria Sanders and Diane Dickensheid. A number of their agents represent memoir. You can learn more [here](#).

**Curtis Brown LTD** is the US branch of the large and established UK agency Curtis Brown. Laura Blake Peterson at Curtis Brown LTD (US) focuses on memoir. To learn more, go [here](#).

**The Tessler Literary Agency** is a small New York-based literary agency with only one agent, Michelle Tessler, who accepts memoir. Learn more [here](#).

**Brandt & Hochman Literary Agents, INC** is an established agency with a number of agents that represent memoir. These agents include Gail Hochman and Jody Kahn who both represent literary memoir, and Emily Forland, Jody Kahn, and Emma Patterson who represent general memoir. You can learn more [here](#).

## In Conclusion

Memoir writing is a huge undertaking, and if you haven't started yet, it might seem like too much. I know that parts of this ebook may have made it seem overwhelming, but that was not my goal.

Based on my personal experience, it is much easier to write a good memoir manuscript if you go into the process with realistic expectations in terms of work, commitment, and publication.

I'm hoping this e-book has given you realistic expectations in all these ways. It's much better to start informed and terrified than naïve and hopeful.

If you have any follow up questions for me, or updates on publishers and agents, please send me an email at [support@authorspublish.com](mailto:support@authorspublish.com).

I wish you the best of luck moving forward.