

Ways to Combat “Publishing Block”

Tips and strategies for finding a way to share your words with the world.

Almost everyone has heard the term writer's block before, it is the term used to describe the inability to write.

There is no good term for the block many writers face when they try to publish their debut book. I am using the term “Publishing Block” here, but acknowledge that it is an imperfect term.

Part of the reason that
publishing block
exists is that many
people believe in the
“Myth of Publication”

The myth of publication goes a little like this...

You start and finish one novel (sometimes with just one draft), and it is so beautiful and important that editors start knocking on your door and offering you lots of money and ideal marketing plans to make sure your book is on every shelf in the land within a year.

The details vary, but the basics remain the same – finishing a book is enough, in and of itself.

**Even in the distant past, this was
not how publishing really
worked.**

(My teenage self is still upset about this)

Often, authors submit their book to their ideal agents, and publishers, and it is rejected, and they think, Ok, that's it.

They have hit publishing block and they don't know a way around it. Even though there are many ways around it.

(One involves simply widening the net of who they are submitting to.)

Almost all of the successful authors I know (and know of) did not start their career by publishing a book.

They got started by following some, or all, of the ways through publishing block that I'm going to outline today.

To be clear, publishing block doesn't just come into play while submitting a book. If you are actively involved in the literary community, you will regularly encounter it while submitting to literary Journals, applying to conferences, etc.

But what changes is that you have a lot more than one route forward.

You are going to experience successes along with the failures, and the successes are going to start to add up! Perseverance is so important.

Even if you get that book published right away, it probably won't be a gamechanger. You will in all likelihood still need to do these other steps to continue your career as a writer.

So if you have already published a book and are asking yourself, now what? This lecture is also for you.

Ways Through Publishing Block

One: Submit to Literary Journals

Submitting to Literary Journals is one of the tried and tested methods that helps lead authors to publication.

There are thousands of literary journals out there, and some can help your career more than others.

But the most important step is to start submitting to them.

Some of the Ways Literary Journals Can Help Your Career

They can help make you part of the larger literary community - you can get to know editors and readers through publication in them.

Agents read the most prestigious ones.

They create a clear track record of publication. This is part of what agents are hoping to see in the bio section of your query letter.

Many lit journals nominate the work they publish for awards like the Pushcart and the Best of the Net. This can really help you stand out.

I can (and have) talked about this at length before - including a lecture for Authors Publish.

If you want to learn a lot more about this step, I highly encourage you to read [Submit, Publish, Repeat.](#)

Two:

Work at a Literary Journal

Just to be clear, when I say work, I don't mean the paying kind, unfortunately, most journals don't pay readers or editors.

What I mean in this section is that most writers, at some point, should try to help out a literary journal in some capacity.

Ways You Can be Involved with Literary Journals that Don't Involve Submitting

Many literary journals are seeking readers. You can learn more about this position [here](#).

Often, over time, readers become editors, but some editors start out that way if they have a track record of publication. [Lit Mag News](#) sometimes lists open editorial positions.

You can also start your own publication. I know of at least five journals started by long-term Authors Publish subscribers.

You can also help with website design or marketing, lots of literary journals are looking for people these positions as well.

Some of the Benefits of Working at a Lit Journal

Increases your own profile, especially if you are an editor.

Improves your ties to the literary community

It also gives you more realistic expectations in terms of submitting and publication.

Reading for a magazine and then editing for one allowed me to not take rejection seriously or personally.

Can lead to other opportunities.

Three:

Get Involved in Your Local Writing Community

This is a really important step.

Depending on where you're located, there could already be a really active engaged writing community around you (you might already be a part of it).

If there isn't, you can start to find ways to be a part of one.

Some of the Ways You Can get Involved in Your Local Writing Community

Join/start a writing group.

Join/start a book club.

Start volunteering at your library, a local writers' conference, or literacy organization.

Submit to local and regional literary journals.

Organize or attend readings and other literary events.

Some of the Benefits of Getting Involved in Your Local Writing Community

You can connect with local small presses and other local opportunities for writers that can help boost your career and lead to publication.

You can help strengthen the literary community in your region, which in turn can help improve your own reputation as a writer.

Making local writer friends can help strengthen your writing through workshopping.

It can mean that even if you go with a small press with not great distribution, your local connections can ensure that your book is promoted by the local library and small bookstores.

Four:

Get Involved in the International Writing Community

This step is going to focus on ways to connect with writers online, but there are also ways to get involved in the international writing community offline as well, by attending conferences in other countries (or even your own, and meeting people from the international community there).

Ways to Get Involved With the International Writing Community.

Take online classes, particularly ones with an asynchronous aspect.

Read and reach out to contributors whose work you connect with from literary journals that publish authors that aren't primarily based where you are. For me this would involve reading journals not based out of North America (like [The Bombay Literary Magazine](#)). You can and should submit to [international journals](#) also.

Become active in online writing forums, or on social media, and/or...

Get involved in International Writing Events!

[NaPoWriMo](#)

[NaNoWriMo](#)/[CampNaNoWriMo](#) (you can connect to your local writing community this way too!)

[3-Day Novel Writing Contest](#)

[The Poetry Marathon](#)

[Pitchfests on X \(formerly Twitter\)](#)

It can also be helpful to find community, not in terms of geography, but in terms of identity. There are many great groups, some with conferences attached or other events, that connect writers with similar lived experiences.

Here are some of those groups

[Cave Canem](#)

[Kundiman](#)

[The FOLD](#)

[WNDB](#)

[LAMBDA](#)

[Hedgebrook](#)

There are also lots of groups that are open to most writers, based on where they are geographically. These include [The Authors Guild](#), [The Writers Union of Canada](#), [The Society of Authors](#).

There are also groups
organized around genre, like
SCBWI, Historical Writers
Association, SFWA, etc.

Some of the Benefits of Getting Involved in the International Literary Community

You can make real connections with industry professionals which can lead to important opportunities.

Many writers find their agents through introductions made by author friends.

Many writers find homes for their best shorter work through community membership. It can lead to a lot of solicited submissions.

It can help you have international opportunities to support your work.

Five:

Apply for Other Opportunities as a Writer

There are lots of opportunities for writers that don't involve publishing directly.

These are things like winning grants, attending conferences on a scholarship, application-based writing retreats and fellowships, presenting at conferences, etc.

These opportunities really vary, some don't have much money or prestige attached to them and some do. But you have to start somewhere.

**The right opportunities for you
will change based on where you are
in your publishing journey and
also where you are in your life.**

A list of Opportunities for Writers

[AWP](#)

[Skagit River Poetry Festival](#)

[Mineral School](#)

[MacDowell](#)

[The Canada Council for the Arts Grants](#)

[Toronto Art Council Grant Program](#)

This can also include

Poet laureate opportunities

Conference presenter positions

Residencies at local libraries or other institutions

Mentorships

Teaching Opportunities

Scholarships of all kinds!

This can include MFA and other writing programs. But writing conferences can be almost as helpful as MFA programs.

Some of the Benefits of Applying for Other Opportunities

It can increase your literary profile overall and can make you seem established, even without a book.

These opportunities often help you become more involved in both regional and international literary communities.

The opportunities can directly benefit your writing as well, by giving you access to more thoughtful feedback or by giving you more time to write (through grants).

Six

Publish Your Own Work

Self-publishing has become an increasingly viable option over the past ten years.

Which isn't to say there aren't still a lot of potential pitfalls there and you still have to do a lot of self-promotion, which works a lot better if you are already an active part of the literary community. A lot of the previous points will still be relevant to you if you choose to self-publish.

When people talk about self-publishing, they often think of it as an all or nothing approach. This very much is not the case.

Many authors traditionally publish and self-publish. This is one of the ways through publishing block.

Jennifer Givhan, a poet and author I greatly admire, has self-published a book of prompts alongside publishing her fiction with a traditional press that requires an agent, and her poetry with smaller presses that accept direct submissions.

You should never self-publish something you want to traditionally publish.

What you self-publish does not need to be creative work. It often isn't.

**Lots of authors start Substacks, or newsletters,
or blogs about writing and publishing.**

This is how they self-publish their work.

**This is something I do, and it has greatly
benefited me.**

**Self-publishing can help
increase your profile and help
you connect with your
audience.**

Many poets self-publish chapbooks so that they'll have something to sell after readings so they can generate income and the audience can be exposed to more of their work.

Some of the Benefits of Self-Publishing

This can become an additional source of income.

It can help connect you to others and become part of the literary community.

It can help mitigate the frustration that often comes with submitting to the traditional publishing industry.

It can help you learn valuable marketing skills which will still be helpful if you traditionally publish a book.

Seven:

**Keep working on
your writing!**

You have to keep writing and revising and improving your craft.

But this point is still related to community.

Writing groups that offer feedback are linked into this, as are conferences.

In addition, since a lot of my points focus on community, I'm going to make one thing very clear about the literary community.

When you are an active part of the literary community, you have to focus on lifting up the writing of others. It's about being part of a community, not extracting rewards from it.

**If you enter into community
only to self-promote, you will
probably do more harm than
good to your own reputation.**

(This is as true online and off.)

Community matters so much. Most writers find their agents, their publishers, their first conference opportunity, etc, through friends and acquaintances. It's not the prestige of attending a major residency like Yaddo that changes your writing life, it's often the people you meet there.

Final Notes!

If you haven't read it yet, I really encourage you to read [Truth & Beauty](#) by Ann Patchett. It talks a lot about the various steps she took to become the author she is today.

In general I encourage you to look up the website of every debut author you encounter.

There they often list conferences, grants, literary journals, etc, that they were part of before their book was published. They are showing you the stepping stones of how they got to where they are.

Acknowledgements in books are also really helpful.

The author spends a lot of time naming and thanking their literary community in the acknowledgments.

Remember, if you are failing to make one way forward work - say submitting to literary journals - try another. Keep trying! These things take time. Be patient with yourself! War & Peace wasn't written in a day (nor was it published in one).

There are a lot of options and ideas listed here, not all of them will work for you, and that's OK!

**Wishing you the best of luck wherever
you are on your writing Journey.**

**Thank you for
listening!**