

The

Authors Publish

GUIDE TO

MANUSCRIPT
SUBMISSION

HOW TO FIND A TRADITIONAL
PUBLISHER FOR YOUR BOOK

Emily
Harstone

6th
Edition

**The
Authors Publish
Guide to**

**Manuscript
Submission**

Sixth Edition

Emily Harstone

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Introduction

Often, writers will finish their first manuscript, and only after it is complete, they will wonder: *Where do I go from here?* This book answers that question. It walks readers through the process of turning a manuscript into a book.

The ideal reader of *The Authors Publish Guide to Manuscript Submission* will have already completed writing the first draft of their manuscript.

It would also be helpful to someone who has finished multiple revisions.

The majority of this ebook focuses on the submission process, from query letters to agents and publishers who accept direct submissions. It should answer all the questions you have about manuscript submission, as well as some of the questions you didn't know you had.

The focus of this ebook is primarily on fiction manuscripts, but it does cover the basics of submitting nonfiction.

It is important to note that if you are a memoir writer you should focus on the information communicated in the fiction section

because querying a memoir is very similar to querying a fiction manuscript, and very different from proposing a work of nonfiction.

I also cover issues that trip up a lot of new authors, including self-publishing, vanity publishers, copyright, and the importance of patience.

For a long time, submitting seemed strange and mysterious to me. In fact, for the most part, submitting is relatively easy. This book will help demystify the process for you.

This is the sixth edition of *The Authors Publish Guide to Manuscript Submissions*. Some of the sections of the book have been updated to reflect changes in the publishing world and others have been revised to explore certain aspects of the process in more depth.

The major change this time is in terms of reorganization. This ebook was initially a combination of content created exclusively for this ebook and previously written articles that were reformatted and adjusted for this ebook. Most of the time this worked well, but it led to a slightly unconventional structure, and sometimes information was repeated in a less-than-ideal way. As I added more information to certain sections overtime, issues increased.

So for this edition, I have taken the same information I've always covered and rewritten it from scratch in order to present it in a clearer, more ebook-appropriate way. Three sections were rewritten and the ebook was restructured to build on itself better.

There is a brand-new section devoted to additional resources, and one focused more on building one's brand as an author offline.

This book is designed to be a companion piece to our yearly guide to manuscript publishers, which we update twice a year, in the spring and fall.

I also teach a course that focuses exclusively on manuscript publishing for novelists. If you are interested, you can add your email address to the [waitlist here](#).

The course covers much of what the book covers but provides additional information about revisions, querying, agents, and publishers. I also offer detailed feedback on the first twenty pages, query letters, synopsis, and potential agents and publishers.

Still, you should be able to learn everything that you need to know in order to submit well from this book. A number of our readers have successfully placed manuscripts by following the advice outlined here.

I wish all of my readers the best of luck.

Chapter 1:

Manuscript Preparation

This chapter is an overview. Deep revisions take time, effort, and persistence. Whole books are devoted to this process. If you are looking for a book on this process, I personally recommend [Self Editing for Fiction Writers, Second Edition: How to Edit yourself into Print](#) by Renni Browne and Dave King.

Different manuscripts require different amounts of revision. But if you follow the steps below, you will end up facing the right direction.

When you write a book, it is officially called a manuscript until it is published. One of the tricky things about writing is that it can be very hard to discern when a manuscript is truly finished and ready to be submitted to an agent or an editor.

Some authors constantly tweak their work. Others finish one draft and declare it finished, which is usually not the best course of action unless you want to self-publish.

Every time I finish a rough draft of a manuscript, I go through the following steps to revise it.

Once I finish my first draft, and before I let anyone else see it, I edit it twice. The first draft of editing is just for spelling and grammatical errors. I often mess up my tense shifts, so I try to keep an eye on that. Everyone has different areas where they are more likely to make errors, so it is good to know your trouble spots and focus on them when editing.

During this stage, I also run it through an editing app. There are a lot out there now and many people already have established personal preferences. I personally think [ProWritingAid](#) is the best fit for me, and even then, I don't take all of the app's suggestions. You can try ProWritingAid for free, and once a year, usually around American Thanksgiving, they have a very good sale.

After I've dealt with the worst of the typos and errors, I shift my focus to the content of the story. I think of this as the revisions stage. During this stage, I want to make sure that the characters come across as authentic, with real emotional depth. I want to make sure the plot is interesting and doesn't have any gaping holes.

Once I've done at least one round of editing and revisions, I find and organize a small group of readers.

Many people don't understand why an outsider's perspective on their book is important before submitting, but it really is vital. As authors, we are so close to the work that it is hard for us to see plot holes, gaps in information, inconsistencies in pacing, and many other issues. You can only gain this perspective by asking other people to read your work.

Please be aware that spouses and close friends don't always give you honest answers. If someone just offers up praise on your first draft, be skeptical. We can only learn and grow as writers from constructive criticism. It can sometimes be hard to hear, but it is very much worth listening to.

Try and choose at least five people whose opinions you trust and give them a copy of your manuscript. Do not expect feedback from all five, but handing out your manuscript to so many people will guarantee that you get at least some feedback.

These five people can be friends, but it's better if they are not close friends, so that they can give you an outsider's perspective on your writing. It's great to find either experienced beta readers or other writers to exchange your work with.

Beta readers can be found online. There are a number of beta reading communities on Facebook including the large and active group, [Beta readers find Authors](#). There are other active beta reader groups on FB, many structured around genre, so take a look around before deciding what groups are the best fit for you.

On Goodreads, there's also an active beta reader community called [Beta Reader Group](#).

In both groups, a few individuals who volunteered to beta read for free have been known to redirect towards charging. This is not ethical behavior, as it falls under the larger category of bait and switch. I would not pursue feedback from these individuals.

Beta readers aren't editors, they're first readers and they tend to focus on story and character. A good beta reader gives you honest feedback and helps improve your overarching story. They aren't there to fix all your typos.

If you want any feedback on specific elements of the manuscript, type up a list of questions for the reader to keep in mind. This will help them focus on giving you the feedback that you need. One of the questions I often ask beta readers is, "How close do you think the book is to being ready for publication?" This usually gives me a good idea of how many more drafts I still have to work on.

Make sure that, when they give you feedback, you appreciate the compliments as well as take in the criticism. Read over all the feedback carefully and then let it set for a little bit. Don't do anything drastic to your book for at least two weeks.

Sometimes the feedback you receive won't be helpful. Feel free to ignore it, if that is the case.

After I've gotten all the beta readers' feedback, I do another round of editing and revising based on the feedback I've received. You don't have to take every nitpicky suggestion your readers make, but make sure to address any of the legitimate concerns they may have had.

After I am finished with that round of edits and revisions, I hire a professional editor to review all of my work for errors and to provide feedback on general plot points. If you cannot afford to hire an editor, it is fine to proceed without one.

It can be hard to find a good editor for your work, and a lot of it comes down to fit. Just because someone is a good editor, it doesn't mean that they'll be a good editor for your piece. I've had an editor work out really well for one project, only to be a terrible fit for another project.

I've found some of my best editors on websites like Fiverr, and some of my worst through referrals, which is why I'm always reluctant to recommend a specific editor to an author.

After this draft and one final review for any minor errors, your manuscript should be ready to submit. However, if you have an idea for a change in your plot or other revisions, and you have received a number of rejections, feel encouraged to revise your book again.

Don't let the fact that your manuscript is probably not 100 percent error-free prevent you from submitting it. I often spot errors in *New York Times* bestsellers. It is nearly impossible to be error-free, even with a professional editor. The hope with editing and revisions is to get your work to the point where errors don't distract from the plot and the plot is clear and easy to follow.

If you are struggling to get a book published and have submitted it to twenty or so publishers without any response except for canned rejections (personal rejections are often a compliment and should be seen as such), you should consider another major round of revisions.

Since you are mostly querying with the first two to three chapters, I suggest that you focus on revisions there. Most authors use those chapters as the "on ramp"; when they are first writing the book, they are orientating themselves to the world and the characters they are creating. It is their entry way into the world of the book, but it is not always helpful for, or even geared toward, readers.

I have rewritten the first three chapters of the last two novels I have written, always with positive results. Both times I changed something major which meant I had to make minor edits throughout the rest of the book for consistency. In one of them, the event that became the first chapter had initially occurred before the book itself started, but it made so much more sense for readers to see that event as the first chapter, because it had lasting results, and

it made that character a lot more relatable from the start, which made the book as a whole more appealing.

If you want to read more about the first twenty pages, I have written a whole ebook about that, which you can read for free [here](#).

Don't be scared to make major revisions. Most published authors do. Ruth Ozeki re-wrote *A Tale for the Time Being* multiple times, with various different characters, before finally including a fictionalized version of herself as one of the main characters.

You can always save old versions of your manuscript so you can switch back if you change your mind or make an edit that doesn't work. Just be sure to title the document something that makes it clear what version of the story it is.

Chapter 2:

An Overview of the Submission Process

Most publishers and agents want the same two things—a query letter and a synopsis. They also expect an excerpt from your book, generally the first two chapters, although there is a lot of variation in terms of length.

If it is a picture book, they generally want the whole manuscript. Some publishers want the whole manuscript regardless of length. If you are submitting nonfiction, your manuscript does not even need to be complete and your proposal could just involve one sample chapter and an outline.

There are specific requirements that differ from publisher to publisher and from agency to agency, as well as from genre to genre; however, 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.

Make sure your sample chapters are perfectly polished and formatted. Some publishers want the full manuscript submitted from the start, but all of them expect to receive the full manuscript if they request to see it. It is still important if you are submitting fiction to have your full manuscript complete and ready to go on request.

Most publishers now ask that you format your manuscript according to Shunn Manuscript Formatting, also known as proper manuscript formatting. The creator of Shunn formatting, William Shunn, maintains a helpful and detailed website which you can access [here](#). It can seem intimidating at first, but once you've spent some time on the site, it should be pretty accessible. I find the templates particularly helpful.

You should spend a lot of time and consideration crafting the cover or query letter. This is the first impression you will make on agents and publishers. The next chapter focuses on how to compose a good query letter and the chapter following it will focus on how to craft a good synopsis.

It is important to note that some publishers expect information about your author platform or marketing plan, either as a separate entry or as part of your query letter. Don't know where to start in terms of an author platform? Chapters 7 and 8 will cover that

information in depth, and much of the information contained in this section should help inform the bio section of your query letter, even when working with agents, who rarely request to know more about your author platform directly.

If you meet a publisher or an agent directly at a conference, most want a pitch. A pitch can also be handy to include in your cover letter. Don't know what a pitch is? Chapter 4 talks about what a pitch is and, more importantly, how to make a good one. I always include my pitch in my cover letter (although it is called a hook, in that context).

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 they want spoilers. Chapter 9 will focus on how to craft a good synopsis.

It should go without saying, but it is very important to 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.

If you are focusing on finding an agent, then you should read this article: [The Safest Way to Search for an Agent](#). One of the best, reputable search engines for agents is [Query Tracker](#). You can start looking for an agent there, but not all agents on that site are good

agents. This is why additional research is often needed, but the details of what that research involves are covered in Chapter 11.

Chapter 15 takes into account information from authors, agents, and publishers about common submission mistakes that lead to rejection. It is a must-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 wish.

You should decide early on if you want to submit directly to publishers, if you want to submit to an agent, or if you are open to both. Chapter 10 covers the various pros and cons of both options.

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, but it is also good to verify the information yourself.

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. The term hybrid publishing is often used as an excuse to charge writers. It is not the same as traditional publishing and can often be just as expensive as vanity publishing.

The only time a traditional publisher can potentially ask for money and remain a traditional publisher is by charging a reading fee. Most poetry presses charge them, and more independent presses, including ones I admire, like Two Dollar Radio, are now charging to read submissions. Although sometimes this fee is very minimal, it can be up to fifty dollars. If you want to know more about the different kinds of publishing, [this article](#) covers it in depth.

Chapter 12 is filled with good tips on how to evaluate a publisher's website.

Some publishers can respond to submissions within weeks, while others will respond within a year. If you have not heard from a publisher in six months, you should email them to ask about the status of the manuscript unless they explicitly say they will take longer on their website or they explicitly state that you should assume your work was rejected if you have not heard from them by a certain point.

Some submitting authors really dislike that some publishers ask you to assume rejection if you haven't heard from them by a certain point. There is nothing wrong with this policy, in my opinion. It can seem frustrating, but it allows more publishers to remain open to direct submissions.

Once you find an agent or publisher that you feel would be a good fit, you should check and double-check their submission guidelines.

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. This could hurt your chances in the future.

It's even more important to submit to publishers and agents that are open to publishing or representing the genre you are writing in. A lot of authors mass-submit to agents and publishers, ignoring their individual guidelines, and the author's work ends up wasting a lot of individuals' time. Other times, authors submit to publishers that don't accept the genre the author is writing in, in the hopes that the publisher will make an exception.

This does not end in publication and often causes publishers to no longer be open to direct submissions.

During the submission process, always make sure to track who you have submitted your manuscript to, so that you don't submit to the same place twice. A spreadsheet helps with this. Make sure to include the name of the press or agency (and the agent), as well as the date you submitted the work.

Chapter 3:

How to Write a Query Letter

A query letter (sometimes referred to as a cover or covering letter) is a single-page letter introducing your book to an editor or a publisher that accepts unsolicited submissions.

It is very important to note that, if you are also submitting to literary journals and anthologies, the editors of these publications have completely different and much simpler expectations in terms of what they want in a query letter. I cover those expectations in [Submit, Publish, Repeat](#).

One reason I bring this up is that sometimes people confuse the two types, and submit a really short query letter to a publisher and a really long query letter to a literary journal, neither of which is appropriate.

When you write a query letter for an agent or a publisher, always remember that it is similar to a cover letter in a job application. Be professional. Write in a professional style, even if that style is at odds with your novel. Make sure you repeatedly edit it for errors.

Make sure it is typed and the font is easy to read. A standard font like Times New Roman works best. Query letters and synopses can both be single-spaced.

In your query letter, try to focus on what makes your book interesting and what sets it apart from other books.

I receive a lot of query letters for fiction manuscripts at Authors Publish (even though we don't publish fiction) and many of them are riddled with errors and focus on a personal story involving financial obstacles.

Publishers and agents don't want to struggle through reading an error-filled manuscript and hearing about personal obstacles you face is not going to change their opinion about publishing your manuscript, unless it's a memoir or an #ownvoices work (manuscripts that depict the experience of someone from an under-represented group written by a person from that group).

Keep it short and sweet; don't use language that is too flowery. If a query letter is over a page in length or has to be a smaller font size than 12 to fit on one page, it is too long and has to be shortened. Editors and agents are much more likely to dismiss longer query letters out of hand.

The query letter should consist of at least three main paragraphs: the hook, the summary, and the author's bio, ideally in this order.

Although variations can work, it is generally a bad idea to start with personal information. This should be presented in letter format. Do not use headings for the different sections.

You should lead with a sentence introducing the title, genre, and length of your manuscript. This can segue into the hook but it doesn't have to.

It is also becoming increasingly important to include at least two comparative titles.

If you particularly like an author the agent you're querying represents, or a book the publisher published, then it is appropriate to mention that in your letter.

I try to do a lot of research and personalize each letter at least a little. Most agents and publishers are used to receiving mass emails that might not even reflect the genres they publish, so making it clear that you have done your research puts your query letter ahead of the others.

Creating a Hook/Pitch

The hook or pitch is a one-sentence description of the book. It should be intelligent, intriguing, and concise.

Your hook should not be a rhetorical question.

An agent I knew handed me a small pile of query letters from authors that she rejected. Most of the letters she had not even

bothered finishing to read. She asked me what they all had in common. By the third letter, it was clear they all started with rhetorical questions.

In one query letter, every paragraph was composed entirely of rhetorical questions.

It is best to focus on your hook, be it your main character, the location, or something else entirely. That is the best way to keep the sentence concise and maintain the agent's interest.

Also, make sure that the premise of your book sounds unique. Agents and publishers are unlikely to follow up with an author whose book appears to be generic. Including specifics helps make your manuscript stand out.

I go into more detail about how to write a pitch in the next chapter. Wendy S. Delmater also offers great insight on how to write a hook, which you can read [here](#).

Writing a Summary that Appeals to Agents and Publishers

The summary is the second paragraph, and should not be confused with the synopsis, which is separate from the cover letter.

It is difficult to describe a novel in a paragraph or two. The key is to just focus on giving the agent an impression of what your novel is like, without getting bogged down by all the details.

You don't need to disclose the whole plot here and it's perfectly fine to set up mysteries or actions within a summary without disclosing the resolution.

The information you disclose in the summary should cover part of the first twenty pages and then extend beyond it. If the information you disclose in the summary doesn't overlap within the first twenty pages at all (and this does happen more frequently than you'd think), you need to change it, otherwise it could cause confusion.

Comparative Titles

Generally, between the summary and the biography an author should include two to three comparative titles. Comparative titles are the names of published books that have a lot in common with yours. These books need to have been published in the last two years. When mentioning the titles, talk about what your work has in common with these titles and also about what makes it different. You can learn more about comparative titles [here](#).

If there's one title that your work has a lot in common with that wasn't published in the last five years, consider integrating it into the hook, rather than including it as a comparative title. The same goes for non-book comparisons. If you are going to drag movies or TV into it, think about how you can make that part of the hook.

Writing an Appealing Author's Biography

The author's bio is not a necessary part of the query letter. Some authors choose not to include a bio if they don't have a degree in creative writing or a track record of publication.

I used to think that was fine, but over time, I've come to believe that a bio is always helpful, because the right bio can make you seem more interesting, and can help your query letter stand out as distinct.

Sometimes it can be helpful to include your day job because it influences your writing. For example, Kathy Reich is a forensic scientist who writes novels about a forensic scientist who writes novels. Obviously, her day job influences her work and would make it more believable.

Even if your job doesn't relate to your book at all, it can be worth mentioning. Most writers and agents are fascinated by people who have very different day jobs than they do.

Most people, if they don't know what to include in their bio, default to education, but that's not generally helpful. I wouldn't mention an undergraduate degree in history, for example, unless the work was historical fiction.

Try to share at least one distinct and interesting fact about yourself that is highly specific.

That being said, you should actively be trying to build your bio in terms of publication history and lived experiences. I focus on ways to improve your bio and author platform in Chapters 6 and 7, although often the most practical way to start establishing a track record is by publishing your work in literary journals.

If you want to learn more about publishing in literary journals, you can watch my lecture on the subject [here](#).

If you have already been published in literary journals, even for a different genre of writing, very much include that in your bio. Agents and publishers respect literary journals, and it helps to build one's publication history with them.

This bio needs to be written in the first person and needs to be contained within the letter itself, the exact opposite of how it should be presented when submitting to literary journals.

Conclusion

In the conclusion to your letter, you should do two things:

The first is to thank the agent or the editor for their time and consideration. The second is to inform the agent that the full novel is available upon request.

Do not include the entire manuscript with the letter unless the publisher or agent asks for it. Most agents request the first two or three chapters of your manuscript. When submitting nonfiction,

you should include an outline, table of contents, and a few chapters for their consideration.

Once you have written your query letter, edit it repeatedly. Keep refining it, even after you have started to submit it to agents. Even more tips about query letters are included in Chapter 9, so I encourage you to read that chapter as well before completing your query letter.

It's helpful to see sample query letters as well, although I caution against following their format too closely, which leads to a formulaic-sounding query letter.

This is a great sample [query letter](#) and feedback from the helpful [query shark](#).

Also, you can see Ann Leckie's query letter for her NYT bestselling novel *Ancillary Justice* [here](#).

In addition, Jane Friedman's [complete guide to query letters](#) is very helpful and her [blog](#) is a great resource with a lot of additional information.

Chapter 4:

How to Write a Good Pitch

A *pitch* (also known as a hook) was such a foreign term for me as a young author that, when the first agent asked for my novel's pitch at a conference, I blinked and shrugged. I was seventeen at the time, so I suppose my reaction was understandable.

The agent then had to explain to me that a pitch is an attempt to make the main concept of your novel understandable and appealing in the space of one or two sentences.

I learned later that they could be longer than that, but the best pitches are simple. They are not just two long sentences with lots of complicated ideas. Ideally, they are simple, concise, and intriguing.

For example, the pitch for the movie *The Matrix* could be any of the following sentences:

If Neo swallows the Red Pill, the fate of his captured world will be in his hands.

The whole world is captured, but intrepid rebels are trying to free it.

What you see is not real.

Just kiss Trinity.

Now some of those pitches are clearly better than others, some would only work if you had seen the movie, some might intrigue you enough to see the movie.

My first attempt at a pitch was a complete failure, but I have since successfully pitched an agent a novel through the following methods.

Write a Lot of Pitches

This seems obvious, but it isn't necessarily. You should start writing pitches as often as possible if you are interested in following the path of publishing that involves agents. Even traditional publishers often require pitches, so if you are submitting to publishers directly, it's not a bad thing to practice.

When you watch a movie, write a couple of pitches for it afterward. Also, sit down with your own novel and just write pitches for fifteen minutes. Don't look at these pitches right away.

Give it a few days, then review them. Once you have done this a few times, you should have three or four pitches that you like.

Play with Length

Try writing longer pitches occasionally and then think of ways that you can trim them down to size.

Be specific

A lot of the time when I read student pitches, I see that most of them are generic. The students try and make it clear that the stakes in their story are high, but they do it by using such vague terms that it is hard to connect with.

For example, they'll write a pitch that says, "After today, Tamara's life would never be the same."

The stakes seem high because they are a matter of life and death, but the readers don't have enough context to root for the character, and also this could describe hundreds of different novels if you swapped out the character's name.

Mentioning the specifics of what will change the character's life forever makes the whole of the story clearer and more engaging. Now the pitch wouldn't work for hundreds of other novels.

Play with Focus

A novel has a lot of different things going on at the same time. There can be many themes and plots. Don't try to cover all of it in the pitch. Instead, try focusing on just one theme, plot, or character.

Compare

This sounds like a cheap trick but almost every agent I have ever met wants to compare your book to already successful books. For example, *50 Shades of Grey* is the erotic version of *Twilight*, but without vampires. *One of Us is Lying* is pitched as “The Breakfast Club + Murder” for good reason.

Agents want to know your book is like something that has already gained success, so saying “*The Matrix* with aliens, not robots” might intrigue someone.

Get Feedback

Take the pitches you really like and then show them to people—friends and family members that you trust. Some should have read the novel already, others should not have. Their feedback will be valuable as you develop your ability to write a good pitch.

Chapter 5: An Overview for Fiction Writers

Most adult fiction follows certain unstated and stated rules. These rules cover everything from the length of a manuscript based on its genre to what tense it's written in.

As a reader, I long assumed most of these rules were obvious. But, from reading so many unpublished manuscripts over the last few years, I have discovered that this is not the case.

This chapter won't be able to cover everything, but I am going to try to at least mention all of the most important points.

I'm going to stress that, in general, debut writers have to follow these word-count guidelines and genre rules. Once an author is established, they get to bend the rules a lot more.

That's one of the many reasons that, as a writer who is hoping to debut (publish your first book), you should read contemporary debut books as much as possible, to understand how the current market works.

The first thing I am going to cover is word count. Most adult fiction is between 75,00 and 100,000 words in length.

These are the kinds of books you often find at airport stores, on display near the entrance to Barnes & Noble. Books like *The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion and *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens.

Historical fiction, like *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain, is generally longer and is usually between 80,000 and 120,000 words.

Literary fiction is generally between 50,000 and 100,000 words in length and includes works like *The Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill and *Transit* by Rachel Cusk. Debut works of literary fiction tend to be on the shorter side, generally between 65,000 and 85,000 words in length.

Mystery books tend to be between 75,000 and 90,000 words. Subgenres vary. Thrillers, for example, start at the 80,000-word mark and can go up to 100,000 words. Cozy mysteries are generally 70,000 to 75,000 words.

Fantasy and science fiction books tend to be between 90,000 and 125,000 words.

Horror books are usually between 80,000 and 95,000 words.

Romance novels start at around 50,000 words and go to 90,000 words, but they tend to be on the lower end of that range. Most

mainstream contemporary romances are between 70,000 and 80,000 words.

Short story collections tend to be around 50,000-60,000 words. It's important to note that publishers expect at least one or two, but no more than one-third of the total stories that make up the collection to be previously published in literary journals. This is not true in other genres, only short story collections (and poetry collections) function this way.

Chapter books (pre-middle grade fiction), are between 5,000 and 20,000 words in length.

Middle-grade fiction is between 25,000-40,000 words.

Books in the young adult genre are usually between 60,000 and 80,000 words in length.

Historically, most published novels are written in past tense, not present tense, but this is very much changing and novels written in the present tense are becoming more common across all genres.

Picture books are just 500 to 700 words in length.

Point of view is also a very big deal. First-person perspective and third-person perspective are both very common in novels. As a reader, over time I've generally come to prefer third-person, but there are disadvantages and advantages to both. I think this [article](#) is a great jumping-off point for that.

Second person, in terms of a full-length traditionally published novel, is very rare and I generally discourage authors from writing in that form.

But the most important thing that I have to stress is that you don't use direct address in your novel. Direct address is when you talk to the audience directly using the word *you*.

I have read a lot of manuscripts where the prologue or the first chapter is this way. I have never read a published novel that starts out this way, unless it's part of the plot/structure. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky is an epistolary novel, where all the chapters are letters to an unnamed person.

There are other conventions to know as well, although they are often genre-specific. For example, in a novel aimed at young adults or children, a parent will never be a POV (point of view) character.

In a work of literary fiction, it is very normal for an end to be unhappy or ambiguous, but outside of literary fiction it is very unusual to encounter an unhappy ending.

This is one of the many reasons you have to read within your chosen genre. [This article](#) very helpfully explains how to read like a published author.

Chapter 6: An Overview for Nonfiction Writers

I have touched on how nonfiction is different in other parts of the book, but this is the section where I really focus on what sets it apart.

Most writers of educational nonfiction, outside of memoirs, don't have agents, particularly when they are starting out. This is why many established publishers that focus on nonfiction, such as Chronicle Books and Workman Publishing and all of their imprints, accept direct submissions.

I know nonfiction authors who have published dozens of books and never worked with an agent. Particularly in the “how to” field, they are kind of unheard of.

To publish almost any type of nonfiction books, including cookbooks or books on specific fields like acupuncture or gardening, you have to prove yourself as an expert in that field.

Depending on what that field is, there are different expectations. For example, a chef who runs a popular restaurant in a major city

would have a much better chance of publishing a cookbook than a home cook. But even home cooks have a chance if they prove they have a specialized area of knowledge based on study or having a successful blog, and the book they have is a right fit for the market the publisher caters to.

One of my favorite cookbooks, *Oh She Glows*, was written by Angela Liddon, who got her start as a blogger and continues to grow her business through that and other ways.

To write a book on acupuncture, you would be expected to have a degree or certificate in that, as well as lived experience.

Most books about gardening are written not just by people who garden, but by master gardeners or experienced landscapers.

Books on yoga are not written by just anyone who practices it, but teachers, and usually experienced ones at that.

It's easy to look at something like quilting and think there is no way to get a degree in that, any quilter could write a book about it, but that's not entirely the case. Publishers are looking for quilters whose work has placed in shows and maybe even been placed in museums. I'm not saying you would have to participate in such things in order to place a book on the subject with a publisher, but it would help.

Think of ways to gain experience and recommendations. Be creative; if you want to establish your reputation you might have to start off by teaching your own classes.

Part of this comes into play because most nonfiction publishers want a marketing plan from their authors as part of the proposal.

The marketing plan can be pretty broad, but if you are already teaching the subject, your students could be one of the potential markets. If your work is being shown at quilt shows, that might be a place to sell them as well. If you teach gardening classes at a local nursery, they could sell your book, too. All of these are good, concrete examples of how ways of being an expert in your field can help create a platform for your book.

When it comes to nonfiction, it's also very important to know that you don't have to have a complete manuscript in order to find a publisher.

Most publishers accept nonfiction books based on proposals. They also are more likely to offer advances with nonfiction books, in the hope that those advances will cover any research trips or other costs you might encounter while finishing the book.

Proposal guidelines vary from publisher to publisher but often contain the following components. It is important to read all publisher submission guidelines carefully.

When you submit a work of fiction, it's normal to focus on the content of the work; with nonfiction book proposals, it's important to focus on why people will care and who will benefit from the content. You have to make it very clear the purpose your book will serve.

Usually, the first component of your proposal is a two- to three-page overview of what your book will cover. People often write these last, once they've spent a lot of time with the rest of the proposal material because the overview is informed by the proposal material as a whole.

One of the important components of your proposal is competitive title analysis. This involves listing books in the same market as yours (including the title, subtitle, author, publisher, year of publication, page count, price, format, and ISBN, as well as edition number), along with a brief summary of the book (no more than 200 words). You should be able to differentiate your book from the book you are summarizing. Treat that book kindly; there is no reason to criticize it. It does not reflect well on you.

You have to do a lot of research in order to produce this information, but it's unavoidable. Not doing this will put you at a disadvantage, not only when submitting but when writing the actual book.

Also include the target market, also known as the ideal reader. Don't say that everyone should read it, because that's overgeneralizing and unhelpful in every way. Try and narrow it down as much as possible. For example, if your work is about living with chronic illness, the target audience would probably be people living with chronic illnesses and their close family members and friends.

Marketing plans are very important and focus on how you will connect with your target audience. The more specifics you include, the better. This is a good time to mention any connections you have in the industry or community that surrounds your topic.

You also need an author bio that emphasizes your authority in the area, as well as an overview.

You should also submit chapter outlines or a table of contents, depending on the publisher, and the work as a whole. Sometimes, depending on the work, chapter outlines can be redundant.

If you do the chapter summary route, the chapter summaries should be between one hundred and two hundred words.

Sometimes authors include both chapter outlines and a table of contents, and there is nothing wrong with that.

Sample chapters are needed to give the editor a feel for your writing style. It doesn't have to be the first chapter of your book,

particularly if your book is a how-to book. In that case, submit the chapter you think of as the best.

Writing nonfiction is a whole different beast though, so don't be limited to the resources in this ebook. A great resource is [*How to Write a Book Proposal*](#) by agent Michael Larson.

Jane Friedman also has some great resources [here](#).

Chapter 7:

Building an Online Presence

This is an ongoing process, so feel encouraged to get started on this step long before your manuscript is finished.

This chapter cannot cover all the ins and outs of building an online presence because parts of it are personal and intuitive, but it will give you an overview of what it takes to get started.

When many publishers ask for authors to share their author platform, they are really talking about online presence.

That isn't to say that one's author platform isn't made up of both online and offline components, it very much is (the following chapter focuses on those offline components), but the offline components tend to make up the bio portion of the query letter, rather than being anything you mention when a publisher or agent directly requests information about your author platform.

There are also lots of things that don't fit neatly into one category. For example, many literary journals are active online and in print,

and regardless of what medium they are in, they are generally mentioned as part of the bio.

If you have an established audience online already, you should mention it in the bio even if the press or agent doesn't request information about your author platform. If you do not have very many followers, do not link to your social media unless a publisher or agent directly requests that you do so.

Increasingly, even large traditional publishers and agents want authors who already have, to some degree, an audience and have previous experience promoting themselves.

If you already have a significant social media presence, then this is a good thing, even if it is just with personal Facebook and Instagram accounts. This isn't just about the number of followers but the engagement of those followers. Posts should have a fair number of likes and comments.

At least experiment by trying accounts on different platforms. I have had a Twitter account for well over a decade at this point, even though for me personally it was largely a failed experiment.

It's also important to explore hashtags. If you are good at photography, having an active Instagram or Bookstagram (an Instagram account that focuses on books and uses that hashtag) can really help.

There are certain platforms, like TikTok, that can boost your presence, but if you don't know how to utilize them properly, they can do more harm than good.

More and more authors are using Goodreads, (as well as YouTube), to build a platform by reviewing other authors' books and redirecting to their blogs for full reviews. If you enjoy reviewing books, it can really be worthwhile reviewing them on Goodreads. Insightful reviews can build a following for your work.

Authors who used to run traditional blogs are now more commonly running [Substacks](#), as that can help them generate income more directly while building an audience.

Try and find ways to use what you already are doing to build a following, even if it isn't directly related to writing. For example, if you like to develop recipes and are a good cook, perhaps you could experiment with a meal and a book blog or other social media account post.

Just because something doesn't work once, don't give up. Play around with hashtags and tagging, as well as personal fit.

Start broadly with multiple platforms but focus on what works for you. Does a Facebook Author Page work better for you, or is it all about Instagram and hashtags? Figure these things out. It is important for me to keep my professional pages separate from my

personal pages, but other authors feel differently. They add any readers or fans they have to their personal page.

It is important to know your limits and what you are comfortable with.

I have written under a pen name for Authors Publish for four years—for a reason. I have made friendships through the pen name with readers, but I have also encountered some people who have made me feel less than safe. Use your judgment when sharing personal information, particularly pertaining to children and your location.

I know that I could get a lot of attention with photos of my children, who love to read, but I don't really feel comfortable using them for promotion. This is a personal choice.

In-person and online, focus on getting across your personality and information about the book you are writing or have written.

Readers who have not actually read your book will want to connect with something and personality can do that, as can sharing what you are interested in.

A blog, long seen as essential, or a Substack, is still a good idea, though I think you can have more success by publishing articles on the blogs of other writers and established reading- or writing-focused websites. It might be more work to place pieces about writing on these sites, but since these places already have an

audience, it can really pay off in terms of fans for your social media page and visitors for your website. Moreover, it does not require regular posting.

When we publish a feature article by a guest writer at Authors Publish, it often increases the number of likes and follows they receive and books that they sell, because it introduces the author to a brand-new audience of strangers. There are many other publications online that work similarly.

If you enjoy writing a blog or a Substack, go for it. Make sure you link it to social media accounts so that anything you write there gets cross-posted elsewhere. If you set up a Google Analytics account, then you can monitor how much use it is getting.

If having and maintaining a blog feels like a chore, I would suggest crafting longer, more detail-oriented pieces, for other publications. That way, you can build a relationship with other writers and editors, and if the publication is established, it can lend your piece and your reputation more legitimacy.

Target places that have bios listed after articles because that can help you greatly increase your readership. The process of submitting articles has much lower consequences than the process of submitting books and is a lot less involved. It can help you improve your ability to craft a cover letter and converse with editors in an appropriate manner (generally via email).

Online, it is very important to be professional to a certain degree—even when your personality is on display. Online, this usually comes down to not making too many mistakes in spelling and grammar. Even if you are just writing a 140-character post, edit it as carefully as possible before posting it.

Behaving with kindness and patience is important too. Since the pandemic, I've witnessed increasingly rude behavior online (and off), and some journals have even cited rude behavior as the reason they have closed.

Personally, in my work for Authors Publish I too have noted an increase in rudeness, not from the students whom I work closely with, which are generally wonderful, but from those emailing us feedback and questions as well as submissions.

Several debut authors have made the international news this year alone because the author behaved in an inappropriate way that ultimately resulted in their book not being published. You can read an example of how one author's behavior resulted in her agent dropping her and her publisher removing the book [here](#).

Being polite even in trying circumstances can go a long way.

Chapter 8: Building an Offline Presence

Because of the way many publishers emphasize the importance of authors' platforms, writers often assume that building a presence outside the realm of social media and the internet is not as important.

This is very much not true. As someone who reads Publishers Marketplace every week and pays a lot of attention to deals made with debut authors, it is becoming increasingly clear to me how important one's offline presence and participation in the literary community as a whole is important.

It's also been helpful to read the acknowledgment page in the back of debut books. On this page, the writer often mentions the mentors and editors they worked with, as well as the conferences they attended and the organizations they were part of.

In Canada, when authors directly submit to a publisher, they are generally asked to include a literary CV. A literary CV covers both online and offline activity and includes details like conferences you've attended and readings you've participated in.

There are many ways you can support your career as an author in person.

When I first started out, I focused on giving readings. At first, this often involved just being one of the readers at an open mic, but over time I became the featured reader, and more organizations reached out to me first.

Now more often than readings, I'm asked to give lectures for major organizations. These are a lot more work and involve a lot more logistics like forms, slides, and payment. But they often involve a much larger audience. The people involved in the host organization are the ones who end up doing the heavy lifting in terms of event promotion.

Another way to promote one's writing and self in person is to hand out business cards (or share digital ones). You can also think a little more outside the box. A subscriber shared a story of how his wife made him a t-shirt promoting his self-published book, and that really increased the number of people who approached him to talk about his book.

It can also help to review other authors' books. Not just on sites where anyone can leave a review, like Amazon or Goodreads, but for literary journals and magazines.

Attending writing conferences and week-long workshops can make a huge difference, although they can be expensive. I go into more details about how this works in Chapter 15.

It can also be helpful to join or start a writing group. Also, for a while, I belonged to a book launch group, where the stated purpose wasn't to improve our writing but to improve our opportunities for publication. It was also helpful.

Ultimately, in my experience, increasing one's author platform comes down to getting more involved in the literary community, one way or another.

So, if you are not currently involved at all, I encourage you to connect with other readers and writers.

A good way is to start attending open mics and reading series in your area. Also, check if your library or local bookstore has book clubs or writing groups; either of these places is a great way to connect with other readers and writers.

If there is a local literary journal that is active, see if you can help support them in some way.

It's usually best to start off small and then continue to build on the foundation you've created.

Chapter 9:

How to Write a Synopsis

The synopsis is generally 500-600 words in length. It should convey the story's entire narrative arc, ending and all.

The synopsis is the part of the submitting process I struggle with the most. A synopsis seems like the best way to take a story and rid it of all its creative energy. However, the synopsis is an important part of the submission for some publishers and agents. If they don't ask for it explicitly, don't send it; if they do, you must include it.

In any case, you should have one written before you start submitting, because just avoiding publishers and agents who require one is not a particularly sustainable strategy.

Some publishers will require more than 500-600 words in the synopsis, but if they don't specify, this is a good default length for a synopsis.

Because different publishers and agents require different lengths, I write out and perfect a one-page version of the synopsis and then I

copy and paste the same text into a different file and lengthen it, sometimes into several different versions.

One of the ways that I prepare myself for writing a synopsis is to go to Wikipedia and look up a book or a movie I like that I have not read or seen for a while. Then I read the synopsis. Most of the time, I feel bored reading those synopses; sometimes, though, I feel intrigued and want to re-read the book or re-watch the movie. If I feel that way, I study that synopsis and see what they did right. What information did they include? What information did they leave out or simplify? What lessons can you take away from reading this synopsis?

I also practice by writing synopses of books I didn't write, but really enjoy (I do not post these on Wikipedia, in case you are curious). It is easier to pick out what is important in another person's book than your own sometimes, and this exercise can really help with that.

The focus, when writing a synopsis, is not on being creative or impressing anyone with your literary abilities, but on clearly and succinctly conveying what your story is about in terms of plot and character development.

Make sure to focus on your main character (or characters) while writing the synopsis because they can be easier to convey in fewer words than the plot itself (no matter how compelling the plot is).

If you can make the reader connect with a character even in a synopsis, then it will help your chances of landing an agent or a publisher. Only mention secondary characters when absolutely needed. Too many names flying around will just serve to confuse everyone.

Focus on making sure the ending makes sense in terms of the plot and the characters. The ending should have an impact on the characters because that is how a good plot, and a good story, works. You should make that connection clear in your synopsis.

Don't include dialogue and don't raise questions that you don't answer in the synopsis. If you have to simplify the plot for the sake of brevity and your synopsis slightly disconnects from your novel there, that is probably for the best. If the end results are the same, it is okay if some steps are skipped over.

Get friends who have not read your book to read the synopsis; make sure it makes sense to them. Can they follow the plot clearly? Are the characters intriguing? These are good questions to ask, and only people who have not read the novel will know the answers based on the synopsis.

Make sure that none of the text in your synopsis overlaps directly, in terms of phrasing, with the summary part of your query letter. It should overlap in terms of content, but the wording should be different. Often, writers try to save time by using the summary as the start of the synopsis, but that looks unprofessional and

encourages agents to skim-read the synopsis.

Nonfiction synopses serve a different function. Mostly, nonfiction publishers and agents are interested in a chapter-by-chapter breakdown (some more detailed than others), outlining what will be included in the nonfiction book.

Of course, it really varies between publishers and agents and also between subgenres; what a publisher needs to see in terms of a cookbook proposal is very different than what they need to see in terms of a history book proposal. Read guidelines carefully and do follow-up research involving any terms you are not comfortable with.

In addition, you can find helpful information about synopsis on [Jane Friedman's blog](#), and this very helpful information on synopsis from [How to Write a Book Now](#).

Chapter 10:

Agent versus Publisher

I wish there were more ongoing discussions about looking for an agent versus submitting directly to a publisher, but honestly, they are fairly rare. Many books and websites about publishing act as if there is only one way forward: agents.

That is not how it works at all. There are many publishers—including imprints of the Big Five—that will accept unsolicited submissions. That said, there are lots of arguments for agents that I will go into here, but it should not be considered your only option.

When I submit, it is generally to both publishers and agents. You do not have to decide on one or the other. The majority accept simultaneous submissions. I don't think there is anything wrong with trying both at the same time as long as you would be equally happy if either said yes. If you are submitting to top-notch agents and sub-par publishers, there is a disconnect there.

Even if your book is accepted by a publisher first, that does not mean it is too late to find an agent. I know authors whose book was

accepted by a publisher and then they had no issues finding an agent when they had actively struggled to secure one before. Whether an agent is needed after an acceptance is also up for debate, but I do think they can help you negotiate a better contract and help you find homes for future books.

Arguments for Agents

A literary agent is someone who will act on your behalf, dealing with publishers and promoting the author's work. This is their job and a good agent really understands how publishing works and has connections to benefit you. You don't need to do the same kind of legwork researching companies (although some authors do end up doing that).

Agents understand and know book contracts and publishers in a way authors don't. They can also help you negotiate a better contract with some publishers. Some publishers simply don't negotiate. For them, contracts are a one-size-fits-all deal.

An agent can help you secure a much larger advance and can be the difference between getting an advance or not. For debut books, the percentage of the royalties you receive is usually not up for discussion, and that is part of why agents are reluctant to take on unproven authors.

Agents can submit work to almost any publisher and your work won't get caught in the same sort of slush pile (generally). This

should encourage faster response times and your manuscript might be viewed in a more favorable light, particularly if that publisher has a good relationship with your agent.

An agent can protect you from going with the wrong publisher. An agent can also help you communicate with your publisher if your work gets delayed.

When an agent submits your manuscript to a publisher, it is generally the whole manuscript. Most manuscript publishers request that you just submit the first three chapters initially (although there are exceptions).

An agent can help you turn your novel into something that is more desirable for publishers because an agent has a more tuned perspective to what publishers like. But many agents now are not interested in, or willing to help with the editing process after signing with them.

Certain genres like commercial fiction, are almost impossible to publish in, without an agent, because the good publishers that focus on that work are the Big Five.

Arguments Against Agents

Just as there are bad publishers, there are also bad agents. You have to do your research in much the same way, and that will take time and effort as well. Lots of authors assume you don't need to research agents, but that is not the case.

There is one less time-delayed step to go through when you submit directly to an agent. A good agent will generally get back to you within two months but that response is usually not an acceptance. Rather, it is a request for the full manuscript after reading your query or proposal.

Sometimes an agent, even after taking you on as a client, will take a long time to place your work. Direct submissions to publishers can really speed up turnaround times.

Agents receive a percentage of the money you receive for your book. Since authors do not make that much—unless they are bestsellers—this can really affect your income and financial stability.

An agent is no guarantee that your book will be published. Many manuscripts that find an agent never get placed with a publisher.

Agents tend to not know much about smaller presses because they earn less if they place books with smaller presses. If your book isn't a great fit for the Big Five, this can create issues.

Often agents will not be interested in books that aren't an ideal fit for the current market. That means books that are more unconventional or not as commercial can be very hard to place with them.

Arguments for Direct Submissions

It can be a lot faster to submit to publishers directly. When you submit a query to various agents, you have to wait for a request for the full manuscript. Then, if they like that full manuscript, there is the finalizing of the contract with them, then waiting for them to give you edits or feedback (which does not always happen but often does) on your manuscript, editing your piece to comply with that feedback, and then they start submitting to manuscript publishers. If you take the direct submission route, you can start submitting queries to manuscript publishers right away.

In some markets like science fiction, romance, and nonfiction, it can be just as easy to place a book without an agent as with one. The publishers are much more set up for direct submissions and many process them quickly and allow simultaneous submissions. Some publishers even prefer direct submissions.

Books that are less commercial and more unconventional often can find good homes at small presses, even though agents are not interested in them.

Arguments Against Direct Submissions

The dreaded slush pile is a major argument against direct submissions. Your work is generally taken more seriously and responded to more quickly if an agent represents you.

You can't submit directly to all publishers, so if you have your heart set on a publisher that only accepts represented submissions, then find an agent.

You do not have anyone to negotiate on your behalf, but if you are a member of an organization like The Authors Guild, a lawyer can still look over your contract.

Chapter 11: Researching & Querying Agents

In many ways submitting to agents and publishers is remarkably similar; however, this chapter focuses on researching agents and submitting to them.

Most of the steps in any submission process, to an agent or a publisher, are the same.

No matter what, you must start out with a complete manuscript. Along with a query letter, most agents want the first twenty pages of the manuscript. I highly suggest you find an excellent editor to focus on editing just the query letter and the first twenty pages. If you don't want to spend the money, please run it by a writer's group or a group of friends for their feedback.

Some agents also want a full synopsis of the book, although this is rather rare. If they ask for one, provide one. If they don't, do not include one.

Now that everything is ready to go—your query letter, your first twenty pages (or so, as it does differ from agent to agent; always

follow their guidelines), and a synopsis—your next big task is to learn more about how agents operate in general.

A great place to start is with this rather long blog post by Neil Gaiman called [“Everything You Wanted to Know about Literary Agents.”](#)

Another great place to start is the guide to [Literary Agents](#) hosted by Writer Beware.

It's very important to go in knowing a legitimate literary agency will never charge you upfront.

Legitimate literary agents should always be paid only when you sign contracts. They receive a percentage of royalties and/or advances.

Recently, established agencies with excellent reputations have seen their names used by scammers to target writers who are seeking representation. You can learn more about this specific scam [here](#).

The first step toward actively querying agents is to spend time researching them. Researching agents is 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, just to end up with an agent who does not properly represent you or your manuscript.

An agent that 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. And, just as in 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 of, or head, 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. These are all important factors to consider when the time comes to submit.

I would say that over half of the agents I research in the genre I write in, I dismiss after researching. 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.

The first step of researching agents is always the same. It involves finding agents that are worth looking into further. There are several ways to go about this.

One is to use [Query Tracker](#). This is the way many authors find the agents who end up representing them. Both search engines have lots of filters, so it is easy to look for agents that focus on your genre of writing, although you should always verify by other means that they actually do focus on that genre before submitting.

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 acknowledgments section of the book, but if they are not, Googling the name of the author and the word “agent” will often find the results.

I also use the [Absolute Write Water Cooler Forum](#) to find agents. Usually, I look just by browsing the Agents and Publishers forum. I always keep my eye out for the longer threads spanning multiple pages; that could be a good or a bad sign.

I also frequently use [Manuscript Wish List](#), which features detailed “interviews” with agents sharing what they are looking for at this time. The information shared there is generally much more helpful than on their website, and the site is searchable by genre.

In addition to those methods, I pay for a yearly subscription to [Publishers Marketplace](#), which helps me have a feel for which agents are active and successful, and gives me a better feel for current publishing trends.

A lot of writers find Publishers Marketplace overwhelming, and I understand why. There's a lot of information there, some of it much more relevant to editors and agents than authors.

This is how I use Publishers Marketplace. I monitor my favorite publishers, the ones that would be a good potential fit for my novel, and I keep track of which agents are actively placing manuscripts there. This is easy to do, using the Publishers Marketplace search function.

When I read a book by an author who doesn't disclose their agent online or in the acknowledgments, I look them up on Publishers Marketplace to see if the information is disclosed there.

If I have any doubts about an agent's ability to place a book, I look them up on Publishers Marketplace. Not all information is disclosed there, but a lot is. It's how I discovered a few agencies that only place work with small publishers open to direct submissions, including those with a questionable reputation.

A while ago, Publishers Marketplace started offering a quick pass

for 10 USD, which makes it possible to search the site for a limited time. You can learn more about the quick pass [here](#).

Another way is through attending literary conferences. Agents often attend literary 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.

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

I already mentioned the [Absolute Write Water Cooler Forum](#) above as a potential way to find agents, but the way I primarily use it is to vet agents (and publishers). 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 had 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.

[Publishers Marketplace](#), as previously mentioned, can be very helpful for ascertaining how active and successful an agent really is. Not all deals have to be listed there, but most are. If an agent is active on Publishers Marketplace but is only placing at small presses that are open to direct submissions, that is generally not a great sign. For example, there is one agency that only places their books with three presses, all open to direct submissions. One of those presses does not qualify for an Authors Publish review because of ongoing mistreatment of authors.

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, but you can still learn some helpful basics there by following the citations at the bottom.

Sometimes an agency is maligned on [Glassdoor](#), and that’s a good reason to steer clear of them.

A lot can be learned from the agent’s website itself and it is important to learn how to evaluate them. 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 who were successful twenty years ago but have not published in a decade, they are to be avoided, generally.

If they don't list any books they have placed in the last year or two, this is generally a bad sign, regardless of how established they were in the past.

The clearest 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 currently.

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 has membership in a professional literary agents' organization. That in and of itself is not a stamp of approval though, it is just an indicator that they are probably competent. Make sure the organization they list is relevant, though; an association with the local writing group is not relevant nor is a general local business association.

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](#)) and/or if they are part of a large established agency. They should make it very clear what experience they have on their website.

As I mentioned earlier, an agent should never charge an upfront fee. The only exception to this is if you are contacting them through a third-party service like [Manuscript Academy](#). In this situation, you are paying for their feedback on your work rather than their representation. An agent you meet through a situation could go on to represent your work, but generally they do not.

However, because it is very rare to get feedback from agents otherwise, it can sometimes be worth it.

If an agent charges you for representation, it 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; other times, the [Absolute Write Water Cooler Forum](#) is where it is mentioned. If it is talked about on the forum, it is usually clear if 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.

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.

As far as the actual act of querying is concerned, it is important to keep track of the research one does as well as the submissions one makes.

I have two files on my computer devoted to agents and publishers. One is a Word document that 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 is an Excel spreadsheet that tracks my submissions to agents and publishers. It indicates the responses I have received and how long it took to receive them. If I receive a request for a full manuscript before receiving a rejection, I make sure to indicate that. These two files help the submission process immensely.

It is important to set up both files before you start actively submitting your work.

Once I have a list of about twelve agents that I'd be happy to work with, I start submitting. I usually submit to agents in rounds of five to ten agents at a time. It is important to simultaneously submit in this way because it gives you an advantage.

Most agents ask you to inform them if any other agent requests to see your full manuscript. That means if one agent asks to see your full manuscript, you must inform the other agents that someone is actively interested, and that usually speeds up the process across the board.

If you receive an offer for your manuscript from an agent, you are supposed to inform all the other agents you are querying. This can sometimes result in multiple offers and a deadline for your decision-making, moving forward.

For the most part, querying involves sending emails to agents or filling out a form in [QueryManager](#). Most agents do not consider mailed submissions.

Always follow submission guidelines, which vary from agency to agency. At some agencies, a “No” from one agent means a “No” from all agents. At other agencies, you can query multiple agents.

Some agents allow you to send a follow query. Others do not and ask that you assume rejection after a certain period of time has

passed. All of these details are important things to note in your research file, and even directly on your spreadsheet.

Chapter 12:

How to Research and Query Publishers

Querying publishers is not radically different than querying agents; in fact, the primary difference comes down to the nuances involved in researching them.

The bulk of this chapter focuses on research and evaluating publishers for that reason.

I have spent quite a lot of time evaluating publishers for Authors Publish. Most of the publishers I evaluate, I never end up reviewing, because they go against our [guiding principles](#) in one way or another, or are disreputable in some way.

For most of the publishers I end up reviewing, I put a half hour of research into the review, before ever typing a word, although I usually know within five minutes if I am actually going to review them or not.

One or more of the following things usually eliminates a publisher in the first five minutes of visiting their website.

There is a mention of fees of any kind

Some legitimate publishers are charging reading fees now, but that doesn't make it okay. If they mention a fee for editing or anything like that, they are eliminated. Some companies talk about a cooperative payment approach or hybrid publishing. Neither of these things is a good sign.

They are trying to sell you something else (and it isn't a book)

I have no problems with publishers encouraging interested authors to buy a book the publisher has already published. That is a good idea. But I do have a problem with a publisher whose website is really pushing or promoting additional services of any kind. [This website](#) is a good example of what to avoid, because they very much emphasize writing for them, and pre-publication services, while making it very tricky to find out very much about the books they have published, never mind buying those books.

Other presses that offer traditional and vanity publishing often try and reel readers in with the offer of something free, like an evaluation or a workshop that is designed to sell you their vanity services. You can learn more about that technique [here](#).

They have been around for under a year

Most presses fail in the first three years, so over three years old is ideal, but if you are a new author you sometimes have to take a risk on a new publisher. Sometimes these risks pay off, but there is no reason not to monitor that press, and not submit to them, during the first year.

They have been around for two years and have published only one book

This is usually an indicator that they are 1) disorganized, 2) struggling financially, or 3) they are really a self-publishing operation pretending to be a traditional press.

They have not published anything in the last year

If an older publisher has not published anything for a full year, it is not generally a good sign.

If they have only published a few books, I make sure these books are not just written by the editors themselves

Lots of writers these days set up companies just to make it seem like they are not self-publishing. Some of these grow into legitimate publishers, some do not.

Their website is not functioning properly

I don't think I need to elaborate on this point. Steer clear!

If a publisher makes it past those, the next step is to search the [Writer Beware blog](#) for them. It is important to note that if the publisher is named Austin Macauley, Pegasus Elliot Mackenzie, or Olympia Publishers, you should just steer clear of those three aggressive vanity presses. Although, if you are curious, you can search the blog for them, and a lot of information will show up.

I also will look them up on [the thread formerly known as the Index on the Water Cooler](#), which contains a lot of good and helpful

information. But, because it's largely submitted anonymously, do take it with a grain of salt.

After that, I will Google the press. This often is not helpful, but sometimes equals good information. If a listing from Glass Door ever pops up, make sure to read it. These reports are usually made by employees of the company, such as editors, not authors themselves, but if employees are unhappy, this is generally not a good sign.

If I was actually submitting to this company, I would make sure that they publish the same genre I write in and that they met my personal standards in terms of what I am looking for in a publisher.

Also, you should search the Authors Publish Manuscript database [here](#). Often we'll include direct reports and updates from subscribers if a publisher we've reviewed in the past starts to behave in an unethical way.

Just because you've vetted a publisher and proved that they are not behaving badly, or a vanity press pretending otherwise, that doesn't mean they are the right fit for your work, even if they publish the right genre of work.

You should always ask yourself, "Would you be happy if the publisher you submitted to chose to publish your book?"

This might seem obvious, but writers often get so nervous or start to think it is a numbers game in terms of submissions out, that they

submit to publishers that are legitimate but do not meet their personal standards.

For example, I know someone who submitted to an ebook-only publisher, and their work was accepted and they signed the contract. The only problem with that was that they didn't want an ebook only. They wanted an actual physical book, so they were deeply unhappy with what happened, even though their book ended up being published by a respected publisher.

I cannot set your personal standards for you because I do not know you, but I think it might help you to see mine, just to get a good concrete idea about what I am talking about:

I am only interested in a print publisher with good distribution.

If they have good distribution, I usually know, because they mention the distribution company, or I see their books in bookstores all the time.

That clearly eliminates a lot of publishers, even a lot of the ones I have reviewed, but at least I *know* that. That helps me eliminate even more potential publishers even quicker.

But for every author, the standards and the preferences are different. Just make sure you are submitting to companies you actually want to publish your manuscript.

Most publishers accept submissions through email or Submittable. A few have their own submission manager. Some still accept submissions via the mail, although that is pretty rare.

Always follow their submission guidelines carefully. Make sure that they are the right fit for your work; many publishers close their doors to direct submissions because they receive so many submissions that are totally outside of what they publish. For example, they might only publish cookbooks, but the majority of submissions they receive are novels.

When submitting to publishers, there are not as many benefits in terms of simultaneous submitting to other publishers. If your work is accepted by one publisher, you have to inform the other publishers, but usually that doesn't change anything.

If you are submitting to agents at the same time, it can be worth it to reach out to them, if you've been offered a contract. Now that you've done the heavy lifting, they might be up for representing your work. They can be helpful in terms of making sure you are treated well by the publisher.

Always evaluate the contract with care and don't agree to sign anything that involves you paying the press. [The Authors Guild](#) and [Writer's Beware](#) both have good resources for contract evaluation.

Trying to negotiate a contract with a publisher without an agent involved, outside of very basic changes, is more and more often becoming something they are not interested in, so if you enter that situation, please be prepared for the publisher to opt out entirely.

Chapter 13:

The Seven Most Common Manuscript Submission Mistakes

When I talk to agents, writers, and editors, I always hear them complain about the same mistakes over and over again.

The other day, I was reading a back issue of *Poets & Writers*. It was based on the question: “What kind of submissions do you not take seriously?” (I am paraphrasing here.) I was able to guess exactly what the agents would say in response to this question.

Even writers who write imaginative and creative pieces are capable of falling into the same traps, particularly if they don’t know what other writers are doing in terms of submissions or what an agent’s or editor’s expectations are. Speaking from personal experience, I made a lot of mistakes when I started submitting.

Agents and editors are so used to seeing query letters and sample chapters day in and day out, but most writers only interact with their own submission packet. It is always good to start by seeking out other authors' submission packets.

Another good place to start? Learning what not to do. Below, I cover the top seven most common complaints agents and editors have about submission packets. All of the reasons are based on information I have learned from talking directly with agents, writers, and editors. This is concrete information you can use to craft the best submission packet you can.

1. The Submission Did NOT Obey Their Submission Guidelines

Agents and publishers receive submissions all the time where the submitter does not follow directions at all. They include the whole manuscript when only the first thirty pages are asked for. They don't include a cover letter at all. They submit a marketing packet instead of a manuscript or cover letter. The variety of mistakes is wide-ranging, but the fact remains the same—the author did not follow the agent's or publisher's submission guidelines at all.

Submission guidelines exist for a reason. Ignore them at your peril. Most of the editors I have talked to either automatically reject submissions that do not follow guidelines or they refuse to respond to them entirely.

2. They Didn't Submit to the Right Agent or Publisher

There is no way to predict which agent or publisher will be the right fit for you or your novel. But it is pretty easy to eliminate ones that won't fit at all based on genre.

If you have written a young adult (YA) book, don't submit it to a publisher that does not publish YA. They will not accept your book. If you submit your work of fantasy to an agent that only focuses on literary fiction, they will not accept it.

Most authors think of this in terms of what the agent or publisher explicitly states on their site that they don't publish. When submitting to agents, however, it is important to see what books they represent. For example, an agent might not say, "No Fantasy." At the same time, the only books he has represented are works of literary fiction. Even if he was to be won over by your wonderful dragon-filled novel (which is unlikely), he probably would not be the right person to represent it because his connections are in a different genre.

Also (and this is a bit of a tangent), most small publishers who accept unsolicited submissions and are open to multiple genres do not sell as many books as those publishers who focus on one or two niche markets. If you have a fantasy novel, it is generally best to place it with a science fiction and fantasy-focused publisher.

3. Do Not Include Rhetorical Questions

What would you do if your parents were killed by pirates? What would you do if you could breathe underwater? What would you do if your boyfriend became a werewolf?

These and many other rhetorical questions are things that agents are so used to seeing in cover letters that some agencies just toss them into a pile together and leave it at that.

Sometimes, an entire paragraph of a cover letter is devoted to rhetorical questions, while other times it is just a sentence or two. But after reading a few hundred or so of them, most agents grow to dislike them.

It is really easy not to use them in a cover letter and really much more effective, so remove them if you have any in yours. They might seem like a fun way to intrigue the agent, but that isn't what the agent is thinking.

4. Don't Talk About Copyright

"A book with a copyright date of 2013, and submitted in 2016, speaks volumes to an editor or agent. It means it's been shopped around, a lot! If you are really worried someone will steal your material, register it with the Writers' Guild, East or West. For a small fee, they will record the work, proving when you wrote it. And then, unless you are submitting to an entertainment agent or producer, keep your mouth shut. Copyright marks and WGA numbers suggest you don't trust us."

Read more on what [Joyce Holland, Literary Agent](#) said in the link.

Tempted to use this symbol © instead of talking about copyright directly? Don't! It sends the message that not only do you not trust the agent, you are new to submitting. [We talk more about that here.](#)

If you don't trust a publisher or an agent, you probably shouldn't be submitting your manuscript to them for consideration.

That doesn't mean you can't copyright it. The cost of a filing to register work with the US Copyright Office listing a single author and claimant is currently \$45 – This is a simple and affordable way of protecting one's work. One that you can do without informing the agent or potential publisher.

Do note that, if you go this route, vanity presses will contact you. Please ignore them.

Even if you don't do this, it can be helpful to timestamp your work, by emailing it to yourself. Although Word keeps track of this automatically, it can be harder to access that information. Some people mail their work to themselves but that offers no more protection than email.

This is part of why it's so important to research and trust the organizations you are submitting to.

5. Don't Query (Yet)

In this section, querying refers not to the query letter, but to the process of following up after you have sent the aforementioned letter.

Most publishers and agents mention a timeframe within which they respond to most submissions. For some publishers, it is two to four months; for others, it is a week or six months. After that time has passed and you have not heard from them, it is fine to query.

Querying involves sending a polite email inquiring about your submission. I like waiting an extra month on top of the time they mention before querying, just to be polite.

If they don't mention a timeframe at all, don't query for at least six months. If they ask you not to query, don't! These are rules they set in place for a reason, even if they are frustrating. More importantly, querying too quickly or bothering them too frequently about your work can really tick them off. It can also send them the wrong message—that if they were representing you, you would be very needy. Don't do that.

6. Politeness and Formality Is a Must

I have already talked a little about how important politeness is if you are following up on your manuscript, but it is vitally important throughout the entire process.

I've seen cover letters that are rude. Usually along the lines of this: "You are so very lucky to receive my wonderful manuscript."

Often, the rudeness is right at the end of the cover letter, such as signing off with this line: “I can’t wait to receive the acceptance letter that you will send me.”

It is also particularly important to respond politely, or not at all, if they decline your submission. Sending them an email imploring them to give your work a second look or calling them out for rejecting your work will only do you harm. Remember that agents, agencies, and publishers talk to each other. If you behave badly, it could hurt your reputation on a much larger scale than you might be thinking.

Remember that it isn’t just when engaging with the agent directly that you have to be polite. If you are polite via email, but then blog or tweet to complain about the whole experience, the agent will likely find out. They will then be even less pleased.

It is also important to be formal with your cover letter, just as you would be formal for a job (although, honestly, I have read a lot of rude and informal cover letters in my day).

Think of this as a time to make an impression that is professional. Even if your book is the new version of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, you want your cover letter to convey reliability. Unless you already have a Hunter S. Thompson-like publication backlog, in which case you would probably not be reading this book.

But don't go over the top. I have read a cover letter where every other word was archaic and appeared to be pulled from the thesaurus. It did not make a positive impression.

7. Know the Agent's Name

Number one on my list of things never to do is to address a query to thirty or forty agents or editors at the same time. I'm talking about listing them in the header of your query. We usually toss those without even reading the subject line. Someone sent me one yesterday addressed to at least fifty other agents. I took a moment and tried to figure out what their reasoning might be. Did the writer think I would immediately jump on the material, worried someone would beat me out of a bestseller? Really?

I'm not foolish enough to think authors aren't submitting to more than one agent or editor at a time. I certainly do, but I never list them so everyone knows. By the same reasoning, don't ever, ever send material to all the agents at one agency. We do talk to one another.

I recently received a query stating the author had done his homework and investigated dozens of agents and agencies. It boiled down to me being the perfect person to represent his masterpiece. (Yes, that's what he called it.) Unfortunately, for him, he addressed the query to Ms.

Gallagher. Lesson: Be very careful before you press the send button.

—Joyce Holland, Literary Agent

When you submit directly to a publisher, unless they specifically state which editor you are submitting to, you don't know the editor's name. If you know the editor's name, use it. If it isn't obviously provided for you—don't use a name. Just say *Dear Editors*. Assume that more than one will see your submission.

Chapter 14: Alternative Ways to Connect with Agents and Publishers

This book primarily focuses on submitting to agents and publishers through email, post, and submission managers. There are other ways to connect with agents and publishers, and they often increase your odds of success. Some are straightforward, others are not.

A lot of people think of these alternative methods as specific things, like following the right hashtag on Twitter or going to a pitching conference. All those things are important and I will cover them, but in my experience the number one best way to connect with agents and publishers is through being part of a writing community. I

If you are part of a strong writing community, it will benefit you in so many ways. It can help you connect with fellow writers who can help keep you up to date about writing opportunities. They can encourage you and support you by attending readings and

promoting your work to their connections, which could include other writers, agents, and publishers.

The two agents who have been serious about my work were both connections I made through the writing community. The first three times my writing was published were through offers from literary journal editors, not through general submissions.

With many of the most prestigious publishers I've worked with, the offer happened through connections. Often not even close connections—often the friends of friends of friends—in the writing community.

This is not to say I haven't placed lots of work through submitting like everyone else does—that is how I have done the bulk of my publishing—but connections do really make a difference.

When I was published in a Knopf anthology, I didn't know the editors, but I only got their submission email address through a friend of the editors.

I think a lot of writers start out trying to make connections directly with agents and publishers, whereas often it can be just as good to know someone who knows someone.

It's part of why it is important to always be polite and friendly. I had a friend behave very rudely to an editor who worked for a journal she wasn't interested in publishing with. That editor told the story of the rude encounter to many of her industry friends.

It is also hard to know how everyone is connected. I was talking to a non-writer about my work, just because it came up in conversation. It turns out her partner was an editor at a prestigious journal and he ended up soliciting my work.

In person, it can be easier to remember to be polite. When online, people sometimes forget about manners and are more outspoken and rude. This is not without consequences.

Writers who are part of a writing community are much more likely to be successful than authors operating in isolation.

Now, in order to be part of a healthy community, you can't just take from the community—you have to contribute to it as well. Every writer has different things to offer their community. Sometimes it's editing feedback, or it could be sharing the opportunities you know of. Maybe you write fiction, but you know a nonfiction editor that might be a good fit for someone.

If you go into a community just to take advantage of connections, people will pick up on that rather quickly and you will not be welcomed or encouraged. It is much better to start out offering to help than asking for it.

Offline connections are good because they tend to be more concrete. You know where they stand with that person. Online, it can be easy to over- or underestimate your closeness.

I've talked a lot about the importance of a writing community, but haven't yet talked about how to actually become a part of that writing community.

Offline it can be easy to connect with writers and the writing community by joining a writer's group. Some bookstores, libraries, and schools host these, but most are hosted in people's homes.

Writing groups usually focus on writing and editing each other's work. But there are others that focus more on publishing and helping each member promote their work.

Readings and open mics are a good place to go to meet other writers (and maybe find a writing group to join). You don't have to read at these events but you should try and be social. Going to these events alone can really help because it forces you to be more outgoing.

Going to conferences, writers retreats, and week-long workshops are great ways to meet fellow writers. I talk in depth about this [here](#).

I have a network of writer friends all across North America because of conferences and workshops.

Attending local writing classes hosted at colleges and bookstores can really help as well. I've made great connections through these and several of the writing groups I've been involved with have formed out of these.

Online forums and [Facebook Groups](#) can be great ways to find online connections and build relationships with them. Twitter also works for lots of people. I could spend a lot more time on this, but this should be enough to get you started.

Another way to connect more directly to publishers is by attending conferences. There are whole conferences around pitching. At many conferences, you can meet publishers directly, as well as agents.

If you want to try and find a good conference to attend, [this list](#) of writing conferences (including week-long workshops) and residencies is compiled by *Poets & Writers*. There is also [this list](#) of thirty American writing conferences. And, if you're based in Canada, [this list](#) is for you and includes a number of free and low-cost options.

Sometimes publishers who are not open to direct submissions generally offer up specific editors' email addresses as open for direct submissions on Twitter/X. So, if you are really interested in a publisher that isn't open to direct submissions, follow their editors on Twitter, just in case.

Facebook groups, particularly private or secret ones, can be great places to find out about other publishing opportunities. Even though they are online, I usually am asked to join these groups by offline writer friends, so keep that in mind.

I know of a number of friends and some famous authors who found agents through publishing their work in respected literary journals. The agents reached out to them after reading the literary journal.

The important thing to do is put yourself and your writing out there. Submitting to traditional manuscript publishers is important and it does often equal publication in the long term, but trying multiple methods certainly helps.

The great thing about being part of the writing community is that not only is it a great way to make friends that you have something in common with, but it will help you in the long run when your work is published. The writing community should help you promote your work, just as you help other writers promote theirs.

Chapter 15:

The Self-Publishing Conundrum and the Importance of Patience

The first thing I want to make very clear is that I don't have any problems with self-publishing. I have read some very good self-published books. I know some very successful self-published authors. That said, I know a far larger amount of people who regret self-publishing at least one of their books.

The *Authors Publish Guide to Manuscript Submission* is clearly not about self-publishing, so I hesitated to bring it up at all; however, I felt that I had to because self-publishing is so prevalent today and most people who self-publish for the first time don't do enough research before starting out.

If you want to be a self-published author, I encourage you to self-publish. However, I would say that the slight majority of people

who self-publish do so because they see it as a step toward getting a traditional publisher or agent. This is not true!

How do I know that many self-published authors think this way? Because they have told me in conversations over the phone and at writers retreats and book talks. This idea of self-publishing one's work in order to get it traditionally published comes up again and again.

A couple times a month I receive an email from an author. The email always looks something like this:

Dear Emily,

I recently finished and self-published my novel, *If Looks Could*. I am now ready to find a traditional publisher. Can you help me?

Sincerely,

John Smith

The problem with this idea is that if you really want a traditional publisher, it is much easier to approach a publisher or an agent with a manuscript, not a self-published book (there is one exception to this rule that I will elaborate on later).

Most traditional publishers—particularly the ones who accept unagented submissions—will not even allow authors to submit self-published work at all. It is against their rules. They will

consider an unpublished novel, or sometimes one that had been previously published by another publishing house, but not one that has been previously self-published.

I know a writer who thought this was a ridiculous rule and he submitted his manuscript to publishers without telling them that it had been previously self-published. One of them did accept his manuscript. At that point, he had to tell them the truth before signing the contract. They dropped his book and told him not to submit to them again. He had violated their trust.

Agents are also not interested in self-published books with the same exception that publishers have. That exception is that you have managed to *sell* a huge number of copies on your own. I placed emphasis on the word *sell*, because even if you are regularly giving away thousands of copies, most publishers and agents will not take you seriously.

There are lots of stories about authors self-publishing and then having their books published by a traditional publisher. The problem is that most people don't focus on the fact that these authors whose books are being chosen by traditional publishers are successful self-published authors who have already sold thousands of copies of their books without the help of a traditional publisher.

I am not telling anyone to not self-publish. I think there are a lot of great opportunities that come out of self-publishing. But I am

encouraging individuals not to self-publish if their main goal is traditional publishing.

One reason many authors who want to go the traditional route end up self-publishing is the amount of work and time involved in traditional publishing. You often have to be incredibly patient in order to jump through all the hoops traditional publishing involves: First, you have to query with a partial manuscript, then a full manuscript, then if your manuscript is accepted, there are rounds of edits and publishers fitting you into their schedules.

It can take a decade of work to get your first book published. This is not uncommon. I don't say this to upset readers of this book—many of whom might find a home for their book well before that—but I want you to know the time involved. It's not just the time, but the active effort involved in submitting during this time. Just waiting a decade with a finished manuscript and not submitting it anywhere will not get it published (I should know, having tried that strategy more than once).

If anything, I want this fact, that it takes a lot of time to find a worthwhile publisher, to encourage you! The minute I finished my last novel (about two years ago), friends started asking me who was going to publish it. When was it coming out? I had not even written a query letter for it yet. I found this attitude incredibly discouraging. Now, not all these friends were writers, but many of them were, though none of them had published a novel.

The people I know who had published novels did not ask me these questions. They knew it would take time and effort.

Don't let others' expectations on this matter affect you. That is why I am warning you about the time it takes. The good news is that if you find a good agent and a good publisher the first time out, you hopefully will not have to go through this long process again; it just becomes easier and easier.

If you self-publish, the time between your manuscript being complete and it being a published thing available in the world is much shorter. It could even be a matter of days.

However, generally authors of self-published work spend a lot of time and effort putting their book out there after it is self-published without any experienced support. They might have to do just as much work or more in the long run to make their book successful, but it is just on the other side of publication.

Additional Resources

This ebook covers a lot of territory but there is still a lot more to cover. If you want to continue to learn more here are some helpful additional resources, broken down into sub-categories for easier navigation.

This list focuses primarily on resources that are not already linked to elsewhere in the book.

Helpful books to read during the editing process:

[Self Editing for Fiction Writers, Second Edition: How to Edit Yourself into Print](#) by Renni Browne and Dave King

[The Artful Edit: On the Practice of Editing Yourself](#) by Susan Bell

Helpful Resources for Querying Authors

[Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer's Guide to Finishing, Publishing, Promoting, and Surviving Your First Book](#) by

Courtney Maum

[The Manuscript Academy](#)

Fee-based meetings with agents for feedback.

[The Manuscript Wishlist](#)

Makes it easier to find agents on Twitter.

[Query Shark](#)

A great resource for querying authors.

[Model Book Contract](#)

This free resource from The Authors Guild is particularly helpful in terms of navigating contracts.

Organizations that Support Authors

Most of these organizations have fees associated with them, but many also provide free resources. They can be a real source of support for their members. The first three organizations, for example, all offer members the support of lawyers for reading contracts.

[The Authors Guild](#)

For writers based in the USA.

[The Writers Union of Canada](#)

For writers based in Canada.

[The Writers' Guild of Britain](#)

For writers based in the UK.

[Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America](#)

For SF & fantasy writers in the USA.

[Historical Novel Society](#)

An international organization of historical fiction writers.

[The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators](#)

An international organization.

[Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators, and Performers](#)

For Canadian authors and illustrators.

[The Association of Writers and Writing Programs](#)

Runs the biggest conference in the United States, among other things.

Marketing

[Now Comes the Hard Part](#)

A free ebook on Indie marketing written by Aliya Bree Hall

[How to Promote Your Book](#)

A free ebook that contains tips on self-promotion from a range of authors.

Glossary

Advance: An advance is a signing bonus that is paid to the author before the book is published. It is paid against future royalty earnings. So, for every dollar you receive in an advance, you have to earn a dollar from book sales before you receive any additional royalty payments. Most independent publishers do not offer advances.

Anthology: A published collection of poems or other pieces of writing, usually on a theme.

“Big Five”: Previously known as “The Big Six,” this term refers to: Penguin Random House, Macmillan, HarperCollins, Hachette, and Simon & Schuster—the five largest publishers in North America. All of these publishers have multiple imprints. All of these publishers and most of their imprints require agents.

Chapbook: A ten- to twenty-page collection of poetry or, less commonly, fiction or creative nonfiction, by one author.

First Publication Rights: This term is most commonly used in the context of literary journals and magazines. Most publications will not publish work that has previously appeared in a different literary journal, print or online. Because of this, most publishers require

First Rights. These can also be called First North American Serial Rights or First Serial Rights. No matter what they are called, it usually means that you are giving that publication exclusive rights to publish your submitted work first. After they publish, the rights revert to you, sometimes right away, sometimes after six months. Many publishers of poetry and short story manuscripts want your work to have been previously published in literary journals.

Genre: A category of artistic composition, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter. Genre can refer to poetry or prose in terms of form. Or it can be a subject matter classification referring to science fiction, mysteries, or various other established types of stories. If a literary journal or publisher says they are not interested in genre work, they are using it as a subject matter classification.

Imprints: An imprint of a publisher is a trade name under which a work is published. Many larger publishers use imprints as a way to market specific books. For example, science fiction books are usually published by a different imprint than mystery books, even if they are published by the same publisher.

Independent Publishers: A publisher that is not an imprint of the Big Five or a large media corporation. Independent publishers can be small startups or large, established presses like Chronicle Books. Most do not require agents in order to submit.

Literary Agent: A literary agent is someone who represents writers and their written works to publishers and assists in the sale and deal negotiation of the same. Many publishers require authors to submit their work through a literary agent.

Literary Journal: A magazine that publishes primarily poetry, fiction, and/or creative nonfiction. Also, commonly referred to as *journals* or *reviews*.

Manuscript: An unpublished book-length work of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry.

Reader: Used mostly in the context of larger journals and contests, which generally have volunteer readers; they are individuals who read a large chunk of the work submitted and who decide what part of that work they are going to pass on to the editors.

Reprints: Work that has been previously published elsewhere. This includes self-published work. Some publishers are particularly interested in publishing reprints as long as all the rights belong to the author. The majority of publishers only consider reprints of works that have been previously traditionally published.

Royalties: Royalties, at their most basic, refer to the amount of money an author earns off each copy of their book that is sold.

SASE (Self-Addressed and Stamped Envelope): If you submit to a publisher, a contest, or a literary journal via the mail, then most publishers require that you include a SASE (self-addressed and

stamped envelope). This is so they can respond to your work with a rejection or acceptance letter.

Self-Publishing: When you publish your own work either directly or on a platform like Amazon's KDP.

Solicited Submissions: Submissions from authors that the publisher directly requests. Most literary journals publish a mix of solicited and unsolicited submissions. Editors can solicit the work of friends or of famous or emerging writers. Most of the time, if your work is solicited, it is published.

Submission Manager: An online program that handles submissions electronically. The most common one is Submittable. Both literary journals and manuscript publishers use submission managers.

Traditional Publisher: A publisher who never charges you any fees, and who pays the author for their rights.

Unsolicited Submissions: The bulk of submissions to most journals are unsolicited. They are the submissions sent through submission managers, posts, or emails to literary journals. If a manuscript publisher says they do not accept unsolicited submissions, then you cannot submit to them unless someone at the publisher has explicitly asked to see your work or you have an agent who can submit your work for you.

Vanity Publisher/Press: Also known as assisted publishing. Any publisher that charges you for their services beyond the basic capacity of a self-publishing company, is a vanity publisher.

About the Author

Emily Harstone is the author of many popular books, including [*Submit, Publish, Repeat*](#), which is now in its seventh edition.

She regularly teaches three acclaimed courses on writing and publishing at [The Writer's Workshop at Authors Publish.](#)

You can follow her on Facebook [here](#).