

Manuscript Publishing for Novelists

This lecture is going to break down the multifaceted process of submitting to manuscript publishers into two main sections.

1. Creating a submission packet.

2. Researching agents and publishers.

It's not that I won't talk about the actual submission process, but preparation is a huge part of the process, and it isn't talked about nearly enough.

Creating A Submission Packet

Most Publishers and Agents Want the Following:

A query letter

A synopsis

An excerpt of your manuscript

A surprising number of writers write a different query letter and synopsis for everyone they submit to. This is a mistake.

In my experience successful writers spend a lot of time writing and revising a central submission packet that they can modify as needed to meet an agent's or publisher's needs.

They have the core material completely ready to go before they start submitting.

A **query letter** is the first thing most agents and publishers read.

It is their first impression of your book.

The Query Letter Can Be Broken Down into the Following Components:

Hook

Summary

First Person Bio

Comparative Titles (optional but increasingly helpful)

These components are presented in the integrated context of a letter, which includes the title of the manuscript, the word count, and the genre.

The Hook

This is a one to two sentence description of the book.

It should be intelligent, intriguing, and concise.

It should make the main concept of your novel understandable and appealing in the space of one to two sentences.

The hook and a pitch are essentially the same thing, except a hook is what you put in your query letter, and a pitch is said out loud when speaking directly with an agent.

The Most Common Mistakes Authors Make with Hooks

1. They make the hook too long. Yes, a sentence can be really long, but it shouldn't be for a hook.
2. They write a vague hook that could be applied to many other books, for example: "She saved the world from impending doom".
3. The hook and the summary convey the same information, making the summary redundant.
4. Using a rhetorical question as the hook.

The Summary

It should be a one to two paragraph description of the book.

It is not the synopsis, which is separate from the query letter and discloses the full arc of the plot.

The summary should only set the arc of the plot into motion enough to intrigue the reader. It should also help establish the main character(s).

A good summary should make it clear what the main character(s) have to gain or lose over the course of the plot.

It is very important that the summary overlaps with the first twenty pages. I have read many summaries that don't include any content that is shared in the first twenty pages.

This is confusing and un-helpful. An agent who is drawn to a query letter wants to see some of the summary play out in the first twenty pages.

This is also a sign that your first twenty pages might be in need of some serious revisions.

The Bio

It needs to be in first person and integrated into the query letter.

If you don't have a publication history you should still include a short bio.

Bios should be no more than a paragraph in length.

Specifics really help set you apart.

Don't lead with the bio, unless you are already an international celebrity.

One of the biggest issues for most writers is that they feel like agents want them to have an established publication history before publishing their first book. This seems like an impossible expectation.

It really isn't though. Establishing a track record of publication in magazines and literary journals can really help.

[This](#) is a good starting place in terms of learning how to do this.

Comparative Titles

This is generally included before the bio, and after the summary.

A comparative titles should be a book published in the last two years, have some element in common with your manuscript (theme, idea, setting, focus, etc).

Include at least two comparative titles.

You can read more about comparative titles [here](#).

Additional Resources

Jane Friedman has a great guide to query letter writing including a sample [here](#).

[Query Shark](#) is also a great resource. Although the agent who ran it for a long time recently passed away the archives are still very helpful.

This article by Andrea Bartz includes two sample letters and a lot of great [advice](#).

The **synopsis** is also an essential part of the querying package and is separate from the query letter.

Not all publishers want it but most do. Please only send it if a publisher asks for it.

Overview of a Synopsis:

A lot of authors find the process of writing a synopsis overwhelming, but it is really important to get right.

Length requirements vary for synopsis, but it is good to have a one page synopsis on hand and ready to go out.

It's important to note that a synopsis should disclose the entire arc of a novel, including the ending.

One of the most common mistakes authors make is trying to cover every single sub plot and character arc in the synopsis. This is not possible. Don't even try.

Instead spend time reading the summaries of books you have read on Wikipedia. When you find a good one try to figure out how the author managed to convey the plot in that compressed space.

It's also important to remember that the query letter and the synopsis should both be written in a professional way. These aren't opportunities to show off your personal writing style. That is what the excerpt is for.

Focus on being efficient and concise with your phrasing.

The **excerpt** is generally what agents and publishers read last (although there are exceptions to every rule).

Overview of an Excerpt:

Some agents ask for as few as five pages or as many as fifty. Some prefer to ask for a chapter count.

The vast majority of agents ask for about twenty pages.

No matter how few pages an agent asks for, never give them more than they ask for. You can give them the exact amount, or fewer.

I can (and have) written a whole eBook on how important the first twenty pages are, I cannot possibly cover all of it here.

You can read the PDF for free [here](#).

The first twenty pages matter, not just in the querying process but beyond it.

Most readers will not buy or finish reading books that don't have a strong opening.

Researching Agents & Publishers

I cannot stress enough how you need to do this step before submitting.

This may seem obvious to you, but I receive dozens of emails a day from strangers, asking me if a publisher (usually a well known predatory vanity press), is a good fit for their manuscript. At this point they have already received a contract from this vanity press.

You would think that once I warn them about this press (which they could have just as easily have Googled), they would turn the contract down.

More than 50% of authors sign the contract anyways.

It is hard to turn a contract down once you've submitted. That is how they get authors.

Always research before submitting.

That doesn't mean you can't research and submit in rounds, that just means you should never submit to a publisher or agent you have not looked into first.

The foundation of researching publishers and agents is understanding how the publishing industry really works. This takes time but it is really important to know the following from the start.

A **legitimate literary agency** is paid via royalties after you've signed a contract with a press. Never before!

A **legitimate traditional press** pays their authors, not the other way around.

There's more details and nuance about what that involves [here](#).

The next step of researching is actually finding publishers and agents you want to look into further.

Ways to Find Agents

One of the best ways to find the right agent is to figure out who already represents authors that you admire. You can do this sometimes by reading the acknowledgments (always worth doing anyways), or via a simple Google search. If neither of these methods work, the best route forward is with a Publishers Marketplace membership (they also have a quick pass).

Publishers Marketplace is worth having, period, because it is easy to determine which agents are active and successful in the current marketplace using their database. You can also look up publishers you admire and feel would be a good fit for your manuscript. They will list which agents have placed books with that publisher recently. You are vetting the agent along with finding them.

More Ways to Find Agents

QueryTracker is a website that lists agents. QueryTracker has a premium option that is \$25 dollars a year, which you have to pay in order to access information like response times. When you are using QueryTracker you can sort agents by genre, that way you can be sure they are accepting the kind of work you write. That said, you should always double check on the agent's website to make sure they actually accept work in your genre.

More Ways to Find Agents

ManuscriptWishlist is helpful because agents go into more detail, in terms of what they are seeking. They also have profiles of editors. The information they have is easy to navigate and intuitive for the most part.

AALA formerly known as ARR allows agents who've been active for a minimum of two years to be listed, and they also have to agree to a Canon of Ethics. That being said not all of the agents listed are active or particularly successful.

Ways to Find Agents & Publishers

The Water Cooler at AbsoluteWrite has a [section](#) that is focused on sharing experiences with presses and agents. It's user submitted info, and it's important to take some of it with a grain of salt but it's still really helpful. It's a forum so it isn't the easiest to navigate.

No matter where I find an agent or publisher I always check the Water Cooler before submitting to them. It is an important part of the researching process.

Ways to Find Publishers

There are lots of listings of publishers. Not all are created equally.

We were the first and remain one of the largest. We only review traditional manuscript publishers that don't charge submission fees and we spend a fair amount of time researching publishers before reviewing them. You can see our most recent guide [here](#). We update it once every spring and once every fall. We still aren't perfect.

Reedsy, Chill Subs, Duotrope, Poets & Writers, and a number of other websites also have lists of publishers. I'm not linking to any of them directly because none of them vet the listings and all have known predator presses on them.

More Ways to find Publishers

I find publishers to add to the guide through the Water Cooler, and also through spending lots of time on distributor websites. For example, even though Penguin Random House is closed to direct submissions in most countries, a number of the publishers they [distribute](#) are open to direct submissions.

Not all distributors are created equally either.

If a publisher says they are distributed by Ingram, for example, it is meaningless. Anyone, even a self published author can be distributed by them. However Ingram runs a number of more selective distributors, like [Publishers Group West](#) which are effective distributors.

Helpful Websites for Vetting Publishers

WriterBeware is a great resource, although a little hard to search.

Glassdoor is a website where current and former employees anonymously review companies and their management. If a publisher or agency gets negative reviews, even if it's just from people who work for it, who are not authors, I generally avoid them. It's an indicator that the management is not the best.

Of the sites I've mentioned earlier, Publishers Marketplace and the Water Cooler are both favorites.

This may seem too obvious but never underestimate the power of a simple google search. I've also found out some surprisingly helpful things on Wikipedia (by starting there and clicking on citations).

In Conclusion

Remember what Stephen King said “The scariest moment is always just before you start. After that, things can only get better.”

Hopefully this lecture gave you the tools to get started and if you want to learn even more, I encourage you to read [The Authors Publish Guide to Manuscript Submissions](#).