

## Notes on Finding a (Real!) Agent

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### Introduction:

The following article lays out the basic elements that I teach in my “How to Get a Real Agent” workshop. Some parts will seem familiar to many of you, because they amount to “conventional wisdom” on the subject. But I'm going to cover the introductory stuff anyhow, because there's always the chance that some of the folks reading this are reading it for the first time. Feel free to skim, okay?

### Agents - When Do You Need One?

Okay, so you've written something. You're proud of it. You think you might want to get it published. You've heard about literary agents, but not now a writer finds one - or what kind of written works customarily need agents. Here's how to determine whether you NEED an agent.

If your work is one of the following, you won't need to start an agent search, because legit agents don't handle: poetry, short stories, articles, or essays. Any agent that claims to specialize in poetry or short stories (or new writers) is an amateur or a scammer. Agents make 15% of what the author makes. So for a poem, or a short story or article or essay, it's simply not cost-effective for a literary agent to handle that kind of work, so agents don't.

(Before someone chimes in to tell me that they heard that Famous Author's agent handles his poetry or short stories, I know that this can be true...for Famous Author. But in a case like this, the agent is not doing it for the commission; the agent is doing it as a favor to his or her client, Famous Author. That doesn't mean it's true for you, with your first sale yet to come.)

You also won't need an agent if your work is aimed at any of the following: e-book publication, POD publication, niche or specialty publication, regional publication, and most small presses. These kinds of companies will read un-agented work, and you can submit to them yourself, with no third party involved.

In the case of some non-fiction, an agent may not be necessary. Publishers publish more non-fiction than fiction, and I know of some non-fiction authors who did fine submitting their work un-agented, even to big NY commercial publishers. When in doubt, read publisher guidelines and research books that fall into the same kind of category as yours. Also, keep in mind that an agent will almost always get a writer a better contract, advance, etc.

In the case of genre novels, there are still some big commercial publishers that will read un-agented or “unsolicited” manuscripts. Category romance is one such, and there are still a couple of science fiction and fantasy markets that accept un-agented work. HOWEVER, their slush piles are huge, and it can take six months or even a year for your work to be read. So you're still better off having an agent, because you'll get a quicker response.

In general these days, if you have written a novel, or what they call “creative non-fiction,” (which includes works like memoirs -- think *Angela's Ashes*), and your goal is

publication with one of the big publishing houses, you really need to sign with a reputable literary agent with a decent track record of sales.

### **If You Have Determined You *Do* Need an Agent:**

For the sake of this article, I'm presuming that "you" (the universal "you") have completed a book. I'm presuming that the book has been revised and edited until it's as good as you can make it. I'm presuming that you've asked a couple of writer friends to beta-read the book, and then used their feedback to improve the book even more. And I'm presuming that the book has been proofread and polished until it's really ready to go out.

So how do you start searching for that agent?

### **Getting Started - Compiling a List, Researching Agent Listings, and Following Submission Guidelines:**

The first thing to remember is that you *must* research each agent *before* you submit to them. That's because the internet is rife these days with scammers, con artists posing as literary agents or publishers, in addition to amateur "agents" who have no clue what they're doing. Incidentally, the scammers aren't out to steal a writers' *book*. Their only interest is in separating a writer from his or her hard-earned *money*. And those amateur agents may be well-meaning, but they don't have the professional publishing contracts, or knowledge, of how to sell your book - so signing with one of them means you'll simply waste valuable time, and possibly, money.

Writer Beware wishes we had a dollar for every writer who has written to us to say, "I submitted my book to Agent X, is this agency reputable?" (All too often, the answer is "no.")

If your book is fiction, and fits neatly into a genre, try this. Take a notebook to your local bookstore(s). Look up all the books on the shelves in that bookstore that are remotely like yours. If your novel is fantasy, for example, and has a half-elf as a protagonist, and it is set in the modern world, that would fall under the sub-category we call "urban fantasy." It's very popular these days. In science fiction there are sub-genres, too, such as alternate history, military science fiction, post-apocalyptic science fiction, etc.

Sub-genres exist in mysteries and romance novels, as well. "Cozies" are different from hard-boiled PI novels, which are different from police procedural novels, which are different from forensic scientist as detective novels. For romances, there are entire lines aimed at particular stages in a woman's life, such as "second chance at love," and so forth.

So try to narrow down your search so it's as close as possible to the kind of novel you've written. Look inside the books you take off the shelves. Note down the title, author, and publisher or imprint in your notebook. Then look at the Author Notes or Acknowledgments section. You're looking for a note where the author thanks his or her literary agent. Many authors do this. When you find it, note the agent's name and agency.

If you do this kind of searching in books in a couple of bookstores, chances are you'll wind up with a list of agents or agencies. Then it's time to start checking your list. Check in *Writers Market*, the hardcopy book, or at [www.writersmarket.com](http://www.writersmarket.com). Jeff Herman's *Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, & Literary Agents* is another helpful resource. Good online sources to use to cross-check for information are [www.agentquery.com](http://www.agentquery.com) and

www.querytracker.net. They're free, and they do "vet" the agents they list. Be warned: many online listings don't bother to check whether the agents are "real" or not.

Many agents have websites these days. Learn how to evaluate an agent's website so you can tell whether the agent is "real" or a fake. The most obvious clue is whether the agent in question is advertising...using their website to troll for "clients" (aka victims). *Real agents don't advertise.*

If you have trouble finding an agent's name, or anything about their track record of sales, check the Bewares and Background Checks board on the excellent "Absolute Write" website: [Absolute Write Water Cooler - Bewares and Background Check](#). What you absolutely do *not* want to do is type "literary agent" into Google. Doing that will result in a list of scammers!

So if you use Google, you'll need to refine your search. So if you have an agent's name or an agency name, type "agent name absolute write" into Google. That will bring up any thread specific to that agent.

The most important thing to remember is that you are collecting info on these agents to try and get a feel for what the agent likes, what his or her literary tastes are. Doing this kind of research will also ensure that you don't waste your time querying agents that have gone out of business, died, etc.

During your research, you'll read listings referring to agents, listings that provide the agent's preferred *submission guidelines*. IMPORTANT TIP: *Pay attention to these guidelines and send the agent exactly what he or she asks to see.*

For example, some agents will say "query only." That means you send them just the query letter and SASE (stamped, self-addressed envelope), if you're doing hardcopy queries. Some agents will say "e-queries fine" or "no e-queries." Some will say "query with first chapter and synopsis" or whatever. I can't stress this too strongly: send the agent exactly what he or she asks to see. No more, no less.

Keep a log of the agents you plan to submit to. You can even rank them by preference if you want. Your No. 1 dream agent is your first submission, then comes No. 2, and so forth. Try to get a list of at least 20 agents for your first go-round of querying. I know many computer literate writers who know actually create databases for their agent searches.

### **How to Recognize Real Agents:**

Here's a short list of "beware" and advisories when agent searching:

1. Real agents don't advertise. They don't have to. If you see an agent site that claims they're actively seeking clients, run like hell in the opposite direction. Can you spell "bogus?"
2. Real agents don't charge upfront fees before a sale is made. The days of scammers charging "reading fees" are pretty much over. They've gotten cagier in the past few years. Now they call their fees "contract fees," "administrative fees," "editing fees," "critique fees," "evaluation fees," and so on and so forth. The operative "beware" in here is that the author has to write a check or send money via Paypal or pony up a credit card.

Bogus agents these days often CLAIM they don't charge fees. And for some reason a lot of

new writers don't equate "paying for a critique" as paying an agent fee. But if it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and the writer has to haul out his or her checkbook...it's a *fee*.

Writer Beware even heard of one scam where the author had to fly to California in order to get "publicity pictures" made so they could be sent along with each submitted manuscript. There was no fee whatsoever associated with the agency, of course. But the authors had to pay \$450.00 to get their "author photos" done. Need I add that this agency never sold any books to advance and royalty paying publishers? Matter of fact, we never found any evidence that they'd ever submitted *any* of their clients' books.

Real literary agents are like real estate agents in that they work off commission. When they sell your book, they get their commission right off the top of your advance, and then again on any royalties you earn. Standard commission these days for domestic sales is 15%, and 20-25% is standard for foreign sales, because the commission is frequently split between domestic and foreign agents.

3. Real agents don't appear at the top of the listings when you type "literary agent" into Google. If you do that, you'll find listings for the most successful and active scammer in the world. (Now currently under investigation by the Florida Attorney General's Office.) When looking for agents to submit to, a quick Google search is NOT a good strategy, unless you refine your search by typing in the agent's name, or agency name, and then add "absolute write" or "scam" or "complaint." Or all three, in turn, just to be really thorough!

4. Real agents list books they've agented on their websites, and you'll recognize the names of the publishers that bought the books. The publishers they list are not POD publishers or vanity presses. They are advance and royalty paying commercial publishers, and you can find those books stocked on the shelves in brick and mortar bookstores.

Any agent that claims that their client list is "strictly confidential" should be regarded with wariness, and their credentials should be investigated with extra care.

5. Being a member of AAR (Association of Authors Representatives) is a positive sign for an agency, because an agent has to have a proven track record of sales to qualify for membership.

However, there are two literary agencies that are on Writer Beware's "questionable" list that are AAR members. We've gotten complaints about them, and it's pretty clear to us that they're making most of their money off their clients, rather than sales of the clients' books.

Learn to trust your "gut feeling" when examining an agent's website. Look carefully at their list of credentials and their track record of sales. If your gut tells you there is something flakey going on, don't submit to the agent until you have checked them out in every possible fashion.

Regarding agent claims: If it sounds too good to be true, it almost certainly is.

6. Real agents don't insist on all interactions being electronic. Real agents have phone numbers, and real snail addresses in addition to email addresses. When you sign with a real agent, that agent will TALK to you on the PHONE. You won't be deluged with a slew of boilerplate-looking emails that are so generic they could apply to anyone.

7. Real agents represent works that are ready to be submitted. They don't tell writers

that before their work can be submitted, it must be edited -- and then offer to refer you to a specific editing service.

8. Real agents don't run contests.

9. Real agents don't ask their clients to send in 20 copies of their manuscript. They don't simply hand writers a list of publishers and then give them form letters to use to send them in.

10. Real agents don't tell writers they must pay for a website so their work can be "showcased" for publishers who will go look at it on the internet. They don't nickel and dime writers, trying to sell them all kinds of dubious services -- illustrations, critiques, business cards, flyers, brochures, photos, marketing plans, etc.

11. Real agents never submit books to vanity, POD, or other non-advance paying publishers. Why would they? Real agents get paid when you, the writer, get paid. No payment equals no commission.

### **What to Send: Synopsis and Query Letter and Manuscript, Oh My!**

We've already established that your manuscript has to be edited, polished, and proofread - totally ready to be seen by agents. There are two other things you'll need to work on before you're ready to actually submit to the agents on that list you've created - the synopsis, and the query letter.

#### **Writing a Synopsis:**

Writers tie themselves into emotional and mental knots over writing synopses (also referred to in the business as "outlines.") They're really quite simple, but they can be a bitch to write well. I advise my writing workshop students to do two versions of their synopsis, so they'll be ready for whatever an agent might want to see along with the query letter, or, even better, what an agent might request to see as the result of reading your query.

The first synopsis you write should be one that covers the events in the book in a more or less chapter by chapter order, allowing perhaps one or two paragraphs per chapter to summarize the events. You can probably synopsise a 100,000 word book in about 7-10 single-spaced pages, skipping a line between paragraphs, and using a good, clear font. The reason I suggest using single-space for a synopsis is to visually differentiate the synopsis from the manuscript excerpt or full manuscript. But if an agent tells you to double-space the synopsis he or she has requested, by all means do so.

The second synopsis I suggest my workshoppers write is for agents that request a "one page synopsis" or a "short synopsis." This kind of synopsis is so short that you really can't cover events in chapter by chapter manner. They're even harder to do well than the first, more extended kind. Basically it's a case of cut, summarize, then cut some more. But they can be done, and it will serve you well to have both kinds sitting in a file in your computer, ready to be printed up and sent out.

Write your synopsis in present tense. (If you don't know what present tense is, you're not ready to submit anything to anyone - go back and take some remedial English courses.)

The synopsis should cover the entire book, including the end. Don't get coy and say,

"And to find out what happens at the end...read the manuscript!" (Aspiring authors have indeed done this, and agents and editors find it really annoying.)

Give about the same amount of detail in writing a synopsis for submission that you might use in describing a good movie to a friend. You don't want to tell every single detail, but you want the plot to flow along in a concise, yet understandable, fashion. Use vivid, precise language, and be specific about what happens - just not detailed.

For example, if a character dies, say so, in vivid language.

"And then Gandalf meets his fate, to the grief of all his companions" sounds dull and stuffy, whereas, "Gandalf faces the fiery Balrog alone, and magically smashes the stone bridge, thus buying Frodo and his companions time to escape at the cost of his life. Frodo and the other members of Fellowship watch, grief-stricken, as wizard and monster fall into the abyss."

Only include details about characterization and subplots insofar as they relate to the resolution of the main plot.

When I'm writing a synopsis, I imagine my audience as a group of wriggly cub scouts around a campfire. They have short attention spans, and your narrative has to be riveting and dynamic to keep them "hooked" on the story you're unfolding.

(Note: I write from outlines. But the kind of synopsis I write to outline a book is much more detailed than anything I'd ever submit to sell a finished novel. When I write a working synopsis, I write it to make sure I have everything firmly in mind and won't write myself into a corner. Big difference!)

As an example, I'm including the first few paragraphs of the synopsis I did for my Star Wars novel, *The Paradise Snare*:

Young Han Solo is desperate to escape the cruel traders that raised him and are the only "caretakers" he has ever known. He plans and schemes, learning the rudiments of piloting, staking everything on getting from sadistic, drunken Captain Garris Shrike and his crew, so he can begin a new life as a free man.

Late at "night" aboard the huge space barge that is the nomadic trader colony, eighteen year old Han sneaks down to the kitchen to bid goodbye to his best friend, the Wookiee, Dewlanna, promising to contact her when he reaches his destination. He's found a job at a religious colony on the distant world of Ylesia, and he hopes to send for her as soon as he's settled in and has earned enough money.

Their farewell is interrupted by Captain Shrike and his henchmen, who have discovered Han's escape plans. During the melee that follows, Dewlanna is blasted when she leaps in front of Han to shield him. Outraged, Han shoots the leader and flees. Donning a spacesuit, he slips aboard the robot cargo ship bound for Ylesia.

### **Writing the Query Letter:**

What is a query letter? It's a business letter, professionally written, carefully proofread (NO TYPOS!) that basically introduces your book and asks the agent "would you like to read this?"

A query letter is not a synopsis. It's not your autobiography. It's short, pithy, and very well written. I can't overstate how important a good query letter is. It's a chance to showcase your writing to the agent. A poorly written query letter will axe any chance you have of the agent wanting to see read your manuscript.

The most common mistakes aspiring authors make in writing query letters are as follows:

1. Writers make it too long. A good query letter is brief, no more than one page long. When I say "one page" I mean a few hundred words long. Not one page crammed from top to bottom with narrow margins.
2. The writer tries to include a synopsis of the book instead of a "sound bite" (I'll cover writing this below). You *can't* write an effective synopsis of a novel-length work in fifty words or less, honest. What you *can* do is write a "verbal snapshot" of the book in dynamic, fascinating language. That's the "sound bite."
3. Writers tell too much about themselves and their lives. Agents and editors don't care if you are mentally or physically handicapped, or your mother is sick, or your kid is sick, or you just escaped an abusive marriage, etc. Everything in the query letter, including in the credentials section, must relate to your book, and your ability to write it. Telling the agent about yourself in an attempt to gain the agent's sympathy so they'll read the book is kiss of death.
4. Writers make a point of telling the agent or editor about all their friends and family members who loved their book. Or about the published authors who read and loved the book. I made this mistake myself when I started out -- it's a natural one to make. But resist! Agents don't want to be told what your friend and family thought. They also don't want to be told what to think. "This book will be a surefire bestseller!" is not a line to include in your query.
5. Writers who try to make their writing experiences look like credentials when they aren't. Writing a few articles for local newspapers for no pay doesn't count as a writing credential. The same goes for recipes in your parish cookbook. Or having a letter printed in the Washington Post. What counts is writing you were PAID to do.
6. Writers who inform the agent that the book they're submitting is the first book in a 12 book series they've spent the last ten years writing. This reeks of obsession, and agents will make the sign of the cross and back away. Concentrate on the book you're trying to sell.

There are two kinds of effective query letters. The first type is a good, workmanlike business letter, and it does the job. It's short, to the point, written in dynamic, specific language, with NO errors of any kind -- no typos, punctuation, spelling, grammatical, etc. Remember, letter-perfect!

The other kind of query letter is weird, quirky, but so irresistible and creative that it will capture the attention of an agent even though it's far outside the "accepted" model. This kind of query letter springs from true talent and writing genius, and really can't be taught. I've seen some of them, and they leave me in awe -- and they immediately captured the interest of the agent(s) they were sent to. However, since they can't be classified or taught, I'm going to concentrate today on the first type of query letter.

My suggested "template" for a query letter runs like this:

1. First paragraph: introduce your project in a one line description of the book, giving the title and genre. In this paragraph you also should specify the length of the manuscript, in number of words, not number of pages. Make it clear that this is a completed, polished book. Sometimes it can work well to quickly compare the book to another work the agent would recognize. However, instead of announcing that "My book is just like X," use language such as, "In the tradition of X," or, "Should appeal to readers of X."

Your language in writing a query letter is very important. It must be smooth, flowing, and persuasive, without telling the agent what to think, or engaging in hyperbole. That one-line description of the work is often a make-or-break. In the writing business we sometimes refer to the one-line description as "the elevator pitch." This term comes from Hollywood, and is based on the idea that writers should be able to summarize their books in *one* arresting, unforgettable line that will capture the attention of a producer or agent - while taking no more time than would be required for an elevator ride.

(An example of a one-line description that actually sold a book to an editor occurred to me while I was waiting in line to get into a restaurant at a World S.F. Convention in Los Angeles in 1984. Harriet MacDougal, a Tor editor who'd acquired a previous collaboration from Andre Norton and me, was standing in line just in front of me, while waiting to get into the café for breakfast. After we exchanged greetings, Harriet asked me what I was currently working on, and I replied, "Andre and I are writing *Witch World: The Next Generation*." Harriet promptly told me to send her a chapter or so when I got home, which I did. She put it under contract.)

2. Second paragraph: here's where you'll need to get very creative, and showcase your best writing skills. This is the paragraph where you provide the "verbal snapshot" of your book in the form of a "sound bite."

Michael Cassutt first described "sound bites" to me, and I'll never forget the example he used - the sound bite for an apocryphal television show. "Bongo and the Pontiff. She's a chimp. He's the Pope. Together, they solve murders."

I never forgot it -- and that's the POINT of a sound bite. It sticks in your head, like a tune you can't forget. I repeat, it is NOT a synopsis. Instead it's a "verbal snapshot" of a book's storyline, a few lines that are so vivid, so enticing, that the agent will immediately want to read the entire book.

An example of one for my first published book, a Star Trek novel titled *Yesterday's Son* might have read: "While checking computer data from a recent mission, Mr. Spock discovers he sired offspring with Zarabeth back on ice age Sarpeidon. Grimly determined to do the right thing, he travels through time using the Guardian of Forever to retrieve the boy. But instead of a child, he encounters a young man, Zar, who has grown up with dreams of the father who would someday rescue him...and love him. When these two must work together to stop a Romulan takeover of the Guardian of Forever, conflict is inevitable -- and far from logical."

That's a sound bite. It's a brief encapsulation that captures the heart and soul and "flavor" of the novel. Not a synopsis, not a summary. It's a verbal snapshot, designed to intrigue, to spark interest in reading. The language you use should be vivid, specific, and dynamic. When that agent puts down your query letter and goes off in search of more coffee, that sound bite should run through his or her mind.

3. Third paragraph: this paragraph should contain a summary of your credentials for writing the book. If you don't have any, then don't try to manufacture them -- that looks



really lame. Credentials fall into three categories:

a. Best and foremost, writing credentials. Writing credentials mean you've *sold* your writing. That means you received money for the right to publish it. Cite the venue, giving the title of the article, short story, or book. If you didn't receive any payment for the writing, chances are you shouldn't mention it. Things like letters to the editor published in your local paper don't count. A recipe in a parish cookbook doesn't count. POD books where you paid the POD publisher to make the book available for sale don't count. Any vanity-published book definitely doesn't count. E-books *might* count if you can document having sold a lot of copies. (Think thousands rather than dozens or hundreds.)

b. The other two categories of "credentials" you can mention would be lifetime experience, and/or academic degrees - *providing they relate to the subject of your book*.

There's no point in mentioning that you have a degree in quantum physics if you've written a humorous fluffy unicorn story. Or a romance novel set in the Miami drug culture. If you've written a science fiction novel dealing with, say, the true nature of dark matter, mentioning your degree would be relevant.

The same goes for lifetime experience. If you have written a detective novel, and you can truthfully state that you've been a homicide detective for 10 years, that's definitely worth a mention.

Mentioning your age, marital status, number of children, grandchildren, whether you have bunions, or gout, is NOT relevant, so don't bother mentioning these things. (Corollary: do NOT send the agent pictures of yourself, gifts, cash, or anything except what the agent asked for. You wouldn't believe some of the stories I've heard from agents about what aspiring writers have sent them. Nude photos were the least of it!)

If you have no credentials to cite, simply state that (Title) is your first novel, and that you're working on your second. And then make sure that statement is true. Agents are not enthusiastic about "one shot" writers.

4. Fourth paragraph: this last paragraph is simply a polite conclusion to your business letter. Thank the agent for considering your query. Tell them you hope to hear from them at their earliest convenience.

Then you write "Sincerely," and sign your name. Don't forget your business-letter-sized SASE (unless you are e-querying).

### **Sending Out Your Query Letters:**

The most important thing to remember while doing this is that old adage that "knowledge is power." In the publishing field, ignorance is *not* bliss. The more you can discover about an agent you're targeting, the better. That way you can "tweak" your query so it will appeal to the agent you're targeting. Remember to read up on their guidelines. Then, *send them what they ask to see*.

If they say "query only," that's *all* you send. If they say "query plus synopsis," that's what you do. And so forth. If they don't say "query only" then you might want to include the first five pages of your manuscript in the package, on the grounds that agents are as curious as kittens, and might well peek at your first five pages, and be impressed, even if query letter didn't set them on fire. If you *do* send those first five pages, make sure

they are terrific. No errors, no typos, an excellent “hook” within the first couple of pages, etc.

Should you e-query or send via snailmail? I tend to think that snailmail gets a bit more respect. A good-looking hardcopy letter just seems more professional. But more and more agents are accepting email queries, and stamps do add up. One thing I so know: *don't* send attached files unless asked to do so. They won't be downloaded.

Try sending out queries in batches. Don't send a query to every agent in an agency at the same time. That's a no-no. If you send five or ten per week, to the tune of getting 20 out there, then you can take a couple weeks off to work on your next book.

Let's say you sent out 20 queries to the top 20 agents on that list you've developed. And then, within the next two months, say, you've received back:

8 rejection letters (just form letters)

and 12 non-replies.

What does this tell you? Well, first of all, it tells you that some agents just don't bother to send rejections when they're not interested, for whatever reason. More and more agents these days seem to have a “no response means no” policy.

But it also tells you that your query letter didn't cut the mustard. It didn't do its job, which is to get agents to request to see chapters or a full manuscript. So then it's back to the old drawing board - rewrite that query until it does what it's supposed to do.

When you DO get rejection letters, be aware that unless the agent wrote on it in their own hand, that it's just a form letter...almost certainly. Don't spend your time cudgeling your brain over what every word in it means. That way lies madness. And don't write back and ask them why they rejected it and didn't tell you why. That would be very bad form, and agents have long memories.

Take it from me. “No” *means* NO. And that's ALL it means. Don't take it personally.

### **Playing the Waiting Game:**

Publishing, and trying to get published, can be a frustrating endeavor. I think the waiting is probably the hardest thing. Compared to glaciers, an alarming number of publishers are quite leisurely in how fast they move to acquire books, publish them, and (especially) issue checks.

This slow pace is extremely frustrating for writers who are querying, or waiting for a publisher to read a partial or a manuscript they've asked to see, or biting their nails, wondering whether the “editorial and marketing team” will decide whether their book will be acquired.

I used to think writers had short fingernails because they typed all the time. Hah! I finally figured it out...it's the WAITING.

So what's a first time aspiring author to do? How long should you wait?

Well, in the first place, if you're at the beginning stage of querying agents or editors, *don't wait*. Multiple queries are not the same thing as multiple submissions, and nobody expects you to send in one query, then wait until the recipient replies before sending in

another. If you can genuinely target 100 agents or editors that your manuscript would be appropriate for, then you're free to send off 100 queries. I usually suggest to my students that they do it in batches of 10-20 at a time, and that they keep a record of it, in a notebook or, if they're computer-savvy, in a database.

So...query your little hearts out, my friends, as long as you've *targeted* your book properly, and *researched* the agent or publisher. Remember, the time to do your research is *before* that query or submission goes out!

Okay, let's assume that your query letter is terrific, a real whiz bang showstopper, and you get responses from agents or editors asking to see the work.

(So how long is it going to take? And how many will reply? Worst case scenario...a long time, and not many. From what I've heard recently, a 50% response -- and I include both rejections and requests to read -- rate is doing pretty well. Also, some agents, not to mention editors, are incredibly S-L-O-W. I've heard stories from SFWA members who reported finally receiving a rejection back on a query to a publisher *six months after the book was on the stands after being acquired by another publisher!*)

If you get a response back asking to see the full manuscript, as opposed to a "partial" -- usually the first three chapters and synopsis (also often called an "outline") *keep querying*. The only exception to this is if the agent or editor asks for an "exclusive" on the work. That means you agree to send the manuscript only to that person exclusively for a given period of time. *Never* send work out as an open-ended exclusive. Agents will may take shameful advantage of your inexperience and take six months or more to send you nothing but a form rejection. Or you may never hear back at all.

If an agent asks for an exclusive, 30 to 60 days is pretty typical. If the agent or editor doesn't specify the duration of the exclusive, *you* should. You would say something to the effect of "(Title) is being submitted on an exclusive basis, and will remain exclusive for 60 days, until (date)" and put that into your cover letter accompanying the manuscript.

If, at the end of the sixty days (plus 10 days, say, as a "cushion") you haven't heard anything back from the agent/editor, it's proper to drop them a polite note via email or snail mail, asking them if they've had a chance to read the work. If you get no reply, then go back to querying, and chalk it up as a rejection. Agents/editors are usually quick to communicate with a writer when they've found a writer they want to represent.

Waiting months and months on tenterhooks, without a word, figuring "no news is good news" usually means you're kidding yourself. Go back to querying. Then if the agent or editor comes back at a later date with a positive response, you'll be pleasantly surprised, not a raving lunatic.

What about if you've submitted your work to a publishing house, unagented? In the first place, lots of publishers won't read unagented, unsolicited manuscripts these days. But there are still some that will. If you send off a manuscript "over the transom" like this, expect to wait. And wait. And wait. And wait some more. Many publishers admit it will take them six months to a year to read the submission. So submit the work, and then keep querying or submitting. Don't drive yourself crazy running to the mailbox each day. (Many agents and editors call when they like a ms. as opposed to writing back, actually.)

What should you do while you're doing all this waiting?

*Write!*

Write some short stories and get them published, so you can include those credentials in your query letters. Start a new novel. Write a nonfiction book you've always wanted to write.

Starting work on a new project will help you through those months of waiting.

### **Make Sure Your Manuscript Lives Up to Your Query:**

If your query letter is bringing you requests to read partials on your book, or even the full manuscript, but then all you receive back is silence...or a form rejection, there's a good chance that the problem isn't your query letter - it's your book that needs work. .

If one agent rejects after a read, this means little. Agents sign very few writers. The nature of their job requires that they be selective. Two agents, same deal. Three, probably still means nothing.

But if you've submitted to a lot of agents and gotten them to read your book, or read chapters and a synopsis...say seven to ten, or more...and you're only receiving form rejections, with no commentary at all on why the book wasn't right, then you need to take a hard look at your book.

I know that will be an unpopular suggestion. I've seen writers who have been rejected two or three hundred times still querying the same manuscript...without every twigging that the book itself is the problem.

If multiple agents reject the book and DO give a reason -- the SAME reason -- then you probably need to take another look at that particular aspect of your book. For example, if two or three agents mention that the book is too long for today's market, I'd consider cutting. If two or three agents say that the plot was interesting, but the characters weren't engaging, or well-drawn, or something in that vein, go back and take a long hard look at your characters.

Now...there are writers who genuinely feel that changing their work, their "art," in order to sell it is like selling out. I've known quite a few writers who felt that way and some of them were quite good writers.

My viewpoint is a bit different. I'm a storyteller, not an artist. If I get a couple of comments from beta readers that indicate that my pacing is dragging in a couple of chapters, I know my story has a problem, and I go and fix it. Of course, I am selective about whom I choose as a beta reader.

### **The Psychology of Querying:**

Querying literary agents can be a protracted, frustrating, time-consuming task, even for writers who have written a good, publishable manuscript. Rejection after rejection can lead to anger, bitterness, and desperation.

Don't let it do that to you!

Keep this in mind, first and foremost: *those rejections aren't personal.*

Unless you've majorly screwed up, and made a real nuisance out of yourself - and yes, this has indeed happened in real life, agents do tell horror stories - the agent who has just rejected you doesn't know you from Adam or Eve. All a rejection means is that this particular agent doesn't want to represent this particular manuscript. The agent doesn't

think you're a bad person, and he or she doesn't have it in for you. Keep this in mind, okay?

And if you're feeling particularly angry or bitter about rejection, for goodness sakes don't pick that day to rewrite your query letter. Angry, bitter moods can "bleed through" into your text, and put the reader off. I've read query letters where this has happened, and it's as obvious as a punch in the nose to a trained reader. If you're pissed off, wait until you've regained your emotional and mental equilibrium to re-write that query letter.

Desperation is one of the top reasons otherwise intelligent writers get scammed. They've been rejected so many times their logic, knowledge and intuition goes right out the window, and they think, "Maybe Agent X isn't so bad. Yes, there are these complaints, but maybe all of these people are just disgruntled writers that Agent X rejected. I'm going to give Agent X a try. So what if I have to pay an \$89.00 'critique fee' to get him to read my manuscript? It might be worth it to get some darned feedback!"

If you find yourself thinking like this, **STOP**.

Immediately shut down your computer, and go to a movie. Or go to the beach. Play with your dog for an hour or so. Or take a long walk with a friend (not a writer friend). Do anything besides talk yourself into doing something you'll regret.

Desperation is something scammers count on to get victims. Don't fall prey to it. It's okay to get discouraged, but don't permit yourself to become desperate.

Remember: *a bad literary agent is worse than no literary agent.*

And also: *there are worse things that can happen to a manuscript than remaining unpublished.*

Work hard, work smart, and stay professional. Good luck!

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