

FINDING A LITERARY AGENT

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Should I find an agent?

YES

- More and more book publishers accept agented manuscripts only. Thus the slush pile is now on the agent's desk rather than the publisher's. Not having an agent will shut you out of many markets.
- An agent can submit your work to more than one publisher at a time. Most publishers forbid simultaneous submissions from authors.
- A submission from an agent is likely to be read first. Response time from some publishers to unagented work can be as long as a year. And who wants to wait a year to hear no? With an agent, the no's come in a lot faster and more frequently.
- A good agent knows the publishing world. Many of them have a background in publishing themselves. They will know the best "home" for your work, whose list it is likely to fit, who offers the most lucrative contracts, new imprints that are looking for manuscripts.
- Once a sale is made, an agent will be your representative in negotiating a contract. Publishing contracts can be pages and pages long, and to the untutored, they may as well be written in Chinese.
- I sent a partial of a manuscript out to a publisher in November. In February, the publisher sent a letter requesting the full manuscript. It was signed "Submission Editor." In the meantime, I had signed with an agent. I contacted her, she contacted the publisher, spoke to a real person, sent the ms directly to her. Still doesn't mean my novel will be published, but it is bound to receive quicker attention.
- An agent will send your work out to several publishers simultaneously. This can work to your advantage if more than one publisher is interested.

NO

- No, you do not absolutely need an agent, especially if you are well connected in the publishing field and knowledgeable about publishing contracts (or can learn). I have a friend who is a well-known author who has sold dozens of books on her own. She is very familiar with publishers' contracts and belongs to an organization of professional writers that shares information. But she used an agent for her first sale.
- An agent will take a standard 15% of the publisher's payment to you. Worth it for a good agent and a good deal, not worth it for a deal you could have made yourself.
- Having an agent is less important if you write for children. Publishers of children's books are more open to unagented submissions.
- Often it is difficult to sign with an agent if you are an unpublished author.
- It is better to represent yourself than be represented by an incompetent, inattentive, or unscrupulous agent.
- Most agents do not represent short stories or poetry, except perhaps as a favor to a valued client, or an anthology from a well-known author. There is no money in it for them in selling short work.

When is the best time to look for an agent?

- When you have a completed and thoroughly edited novel (fiction) or book proposal (non-fiction). An agent cannot sell an incomplete novel or novel idea. Unless maybe you are Britney Spears or Madonna.
- When you have an interested publisher. You may ask why you should pay an agent when you've already made the sale. One word: contract. One author described how he sold his science fiction novel, then signed with an agent. An hour later, the agent called him with a much more favorable contract than the publisher had offered initially. In general, the best response to a call from a publisher who wants to buy your book is, "That's great news! I'll have my agent get back with you." Even if you don't have an agent. If you have an offer from a publisher, you soon will. These days, getting an agent can be more difficult than finding a publisher. Having an offer in hand is definitely helpful

What does an agent charge?

- This varies very little among reputable agents. Most charge 15% of author's compensation for domestic sales, 20% for overseas rights. Generally, the agent receives nothing until the manuscript is sold, although there are some agents who will pass along specified expenses such as copying or fedex to clients. This is highly controversial. Some sources say this is never appropriate. Others say that is the reality today. My first agent passed along limited expenses to me. My current agent does not.
- Generally an agent clause is included in the publisher's contract. Monies due the author from the sale of a book are sent directly to the agent. The agent deducts her commission, and forwards the balance to the author.

What is the best way to contact an agent?

- Get a referral from an existing client. If you know Stephen King, ask him to introduce you to his agent.
- Meet an agent at a writer's conference. This can often be very effective. Often agents take 10-minute appointments at these conferences, and it gives you an opportunity to pitch your work and make a personal impression.
- Do your research and send out queries.

Before You Query

- Make your work the best it can be. This is a highly competitive business. Join a crit group. Edit and re-edit. If you can't proof, find somebody who can.
- Build your credentials. Enter contests. Publish short work. If you are writing non-fiction, you should be an expert in that field, or show that you can access people who are. You need something that will make your query stand out from the hundreds that come in
- For fiction, you will generally need a synopsis of your work. These can vary in length. My first agent wanted a 5 to 10 pager. I have a five-page synopsis of my high fantasy novel, and a 1 pager. I tend to use the 1 pager. Writing a synopsis is perhaps the toughest piece of writing I have ever done. Think about somebody

describing a movie they've seen to you. Boring, colorless, and flat, with all the art wrung out of it. There is lots of information available online about writing synopses

- Prepare a one-page query letter. This should be tailored to each agent you query, but put down the bones. Aren't computers wonderful?
- Generate a list of potential agents. Read the work of authors you admire who work in your genre. Read the acknowledgements. Sometimes the author will credit his agent.
- Use online resources pertinent to your genre. I am most familiar with speculative fiction sites, because that is what I write. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association posts articles about finding agents and a list of agents who represent at least three of their members. In order to be a member of SFWA, you have to be published. So these are agents who sell books.
- Look for a member of the Association of Authors' Representatives. The AAR has a code of ethics that all members must adhere to. In addition, candidates for membership have to have made significant sales. Visit their web site. Not all good agents are members of AAR, but it's a good start.
- Check out the Preditors and Editors site on the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers web site. They have a long list of agents that are NOT recommended.
- If you write for children, join the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). They have a list of reputable agents that represent children's authors.
- Once you have a working list of potential agents, search for them online. Most (not all) will have web sites. If you cannot find a web site, look for information in Writers' Market. I subscribe to the online version. You can do searches among their agent postings for agents who represent your genre. The agent's web site and Writer's Market will include types of work represented, often some of the clients represented, and submission guidelines. The agent's site will be the most up to date, but online WM is updated regularly.
- You may also find other references to your prospective agent online: various authors may list them as their representative; they may be listed as a source of rights for a given work; they may be listed as appearing at writer's conferences or conventions. All of this is useful information in determining whether the agent is legitimate and actively working or not
- Where NOT to find an agent: advertising in the back of writing magazines. Most legitimate agents are inundated with queries and manuscripts. They have no need to run an ad in a magazine.
- Read the submission guidelines carefully. Some will want a partial (the first three chapters, the first 50 pages, the first 10 pages, whatever.) Many will want a synopsis. Some will specify just a query letter. Some will accept queries by email (still the minority). Mailed queries must include a SASE.
- I read an article by an agent that suggested that you always include at least the first four pages of your manuscript, even if the guidelines say just a query letter or just a synopsis. The agent won't be able to resist reading 4 pages. It provides the opportunity to sell yourself via your writing. It worked for me.

Send out your queries

- Some responses will come back quickly. Those are usually the bounce-back rejections. Some of them will send you offers to buy their latest book
- If you are lucky, some agents will request the full ms.
- In my last agent hunt, I sent out 26 queries, received several positive rejections and two requests for the full ms. One of the two offered to represent me. Or, to put it another way, 25 nos and 1 yes.
- There is nothing wrong with starting with your dream agency and working your way down. The agency I signed with was not out there looking for new authors. They had no web site, weren't posted on all the usual sites. It was listed in SFFWA site as representing at least three of their members. I learned that they represent some very well known authors who work in the genre. The only posting I could find said they only accept new authors through referral. I sent a query, synopsis, and my first four pages. One of their agents wrote back, requesting the full ms. I sent it. They offered representation.

What to ask your prospective agent?

- Are you a member of AAR? How long have you been in business?
- How many books did you sell last year? If they supply some titles, look them up on Amazon.com
- Who are some of your clients?
- Do you issue an agent-author agreement? May I review the language of the agency clause that appears in contracts you negotiate for your clients?
- How do you keep your clients informed of your activities on their behalf?
- Do you consult with your clients on any and all offers?
- What are your commission rates? What are your procedures and time-frames for processing and disbursing client funds? Do you keep different bank accounts separating author funds from agency revenue? What are your policies about charging clients for expenses incurred by your agency?
- Keep in mind that agencies won't answer these questions unless they are already interested in representing you. If they are interested in representing you, it is ok to ask for a reference

Run, don't walk

- Even though you have selected your query list carefully, you may receive a response from an agent that goes something like, "Your work is absolutely fabulous, innovative, lyrical. Publishers will fight over it. But
 - It needs a little editing. Please sign on with our editorial service. For only \$500 we can get your ms in publishable shape
 - We require a \$150 reading fee.
 - We will put together a gold-embossed presentation package for your manuscript and post it on our marketing web site for a fee of only \$400 (\$500 for the leatherette case)
 - We require a \$100 a month representation fee to offset our expenses until your book is sold.

- Run away fast. An agency that makes its living charging upfront fees has no particular incentive to sell your book.

A Word about agent-author contracts

- Most writers would love to be in the position of worrying about contract language.
- Agent contracts vary from none (a simple agent clause inserted in a publishing contract) to pages of text.
- Important elements: WHAT part of your work is included in the contract: one particular work, everything you have ever written, everything you write during the term of the contract; everything you write during the remainder of your life with options on your family? Often agents contract to represent a particular work or all work produced during the contract period.
- What is the term of the contract? Usually the author wants a shorter term, in case it doesn't work out, also an incentive for the agent to move more quickly; the agent may want a longer term. What are the provisions for opting out? From the author's point of view, an opt out clause with 30 days written notice is a good element. The only thing worse than no agent is a bad agent.
- You might want financial details included in the contract. There is a model author-agent contract posted on the SWFA web site. Some agencies post their contract on their web sites
- You're not going to get everything you want, but you should be aware of these issues.

Helpful Links

<http://www.sfw.org/beware/agents.html> : tips for avoiding fraudulent agents

<http://www.sfw.org/beware/> list of agents and publishers to be wary of; articles and alerts about fraudulent publishing practices

<http://www.sfw.org/2009/07/sfw-model-author-agent-contract/> model agent contract

<http://www.aar-online.org/> Association of Authors' Representatives includes list of members and suggested questions for an agent you are considering

<http://writersmarket.com/> paid site; continuously updated. Can search agents, publishers, by a variety of criteria.

<http://www.fictionaddiction.net/agents.html> A list of literary agents. Agents can post their own information, so do your research.

<http://scbwi.org/> SCBWI offers a listing of agents to its members. If you write for children, it's well worth joining.