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How To Break Into Print Publishing

By Michael LaRocca

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The big question. Do you submit directly to the publishers, or do you find an agent who will do that for you? Based on anecdotal evidence I've heard, it can work either way. The bottom line is, if a publisher reads what he can sell, he'll buy it. It doesn't matter if it comes from an author or an agent. The trick is getting him to read it. That's always your focus.

Some people swear by agents because they're the ones who will get you larger percentages and advances. I've decided I don't care quite so much about that. In the case of a new author, I sincerely doubt that'll happen anyway. I'd hate to lose my first sale because some greedy agent asked for too much money. Not that I believe that'll happen either.

There are also those who swear by agents because many publishers won't look at an "unsolicited manuscript." That's true enough. They ain't got time. They're using agents as a preliminary screening process.

Someone recommended that once you've selected some potential publishers, phone each one and ask how they would like to be approached. Ask whom specifically you should address your work to. Then you can honestly call it a "solicited manuscript." (Always be honest in your correspondence.)

If this doesn't work, because you can't phone or the secretary refuses to cooperate and tells you things like "we only accept material from reputable literary agents," then mail your query letter, bio, synopsis, and sample chapter(s). They can only say no, or they can say your query looks interesting and they want to see the rest of the manuscript.

If you hook a publisher this way, odds are the publisher will like for you to have an agent. So this is when you call one, after you've hooked the publisher. The agent gets 15% for doing practically nothing, so he'll take the job. The publisher will become more interested when your agent phones saying he's (or she's) looking after your interests in this matter.

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The most important step is to get your presentation looking as professional as humanly possible. No mistakes. None. Zero. Nada. The vast majority of rejections aren't because the story is bad, but because the Acquisitions Editor concludes that it'll be too much work to make it "ready to read." With new authors, publishers usually lose money. Advertising, print inventory... don't ask them to invest a great deal of editing time as well. They won't do it. It's just that simple.

The Selection Process

The most important part of getting your error-free manuscript published is choosing the right market. The best way to do this is to read books that are aimed at the same target audience as your own. If you want to approach publishers directly, look at who published those books. Preferably one who publishes lots of books in that genre, not just one or two authors. Their marketing machine is already positioned to announce your manuscript to your target audience, and they want more books of the type

that you write. They are your best bet.

Some authors thank their editors. If you're going straight to the publisher, note the editors' names and use those, preferably after a phone call to ensure the editor still works there. If you can, just phone the publisher and tell whoever answers the phone something like "I'm writing a letter to so-and-so, and I want to be sure I'm spelling the name correctly."

If you want to approach an agent first, look in the acknowledgements sections of those books. Some authors thank their agents. Look up those agents and start with them. Tell how you found them. This will impress them. You know they've got a track record in your genre. They know how to sell to publishers who are aimed at your target audience, so let them do it.

offers some additional advice on selecting an

agent.

Whichever method you use, go in fully prepared. Meaning, work through all the steps below before you submit anything.

Overview

Your aim is to convince someone who not only does not know you, but does not want to know you, and has read too many bad books, that your book is different. For this you need a cover letter, bio, synopsis, and sample(s) chapter of such sublime wit, wisdom and genius that even the most jaded and cynical editor can take pleasure in it.

Take your time. Don't just whip up something in a day and send it out. You're probably looking at a one or two year gap between acceptance and publication. So in the grand scheme of things, taking the time to make your presentation really shine won't matter. EXCEPT, that it'll ensure you get published in the first place.

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Every publisher has "writer guidelines." Get them. Read them. Follow them. They're using the process of elimination to get out of reading these submissions. The first step in that process is, bump off everyone who can't follow the guidelines. Don't be one of them.

Preparing Your Query Letter

This will be the first impression that they get of you. Make it a good one! Edit that letter as hard as you would a manuscript, and make the damn thing perfect. Make it good writing. Sum up your book in such a way as to make the recipient of the letter say, "Wow, I want to read this book."

The first page of your book, along with the jacket text, are what usually determines whether a browser buys your book or puts it back on the shelf. As you write your query letter, think of what you'd put on that book jacket, and work that concept into your letter.

Never address your query letter To Whom It May Concern, Dear Editor, or any of that. Get a name. When you find the books that you really like, and are searching them for potential publishers, call those publishers. Ask who edited those books. If you want to approach the publisher directly, write to those editors.

You can find advice on writing your query letters etc. at:

The "query letter clinic" in the 2001 WRITERS MARKET is well worth reading. If you're not going to buy the book, go to the library and read that section of it.

With a simple bit of good writing, and we all know you can do that since you've already written and polished your manuscript, you'll make it past this first hurdle. The editor reads your letter, sees nothing in it to stop him from continuing, and has no choice.

What would stop him? Typos. Grammar. Spelling. Boredom. Or anything that says "I write so much better than Stephen King that he's not fit to hold my jock strap. Buy my book and we'll both get rich."

Writing Your Bio

Don't lie. That's the first rule. The second rule is, don't forget any writing credits. List everything relevant you've got. Publications in decent magazines or newspapers. Credits in TV, films, theaters. Any literary prize you've managed to get in adulthood. The fact that you're a Professor of English or an editor on a sports journal.

If you have no literary background, no education, or no respectable publications, but you spent fifteen years in solitary confinement in a Siberian Work Camp, that might indicate that you have a story to tell. But if you're writing about cuddly koalas to entertain the under-five crowd, this piece of information may be more than anyone needs to know.

You can list your credits either chronologically or from most impressive to least impressive. Just whichever puts you in the best light. You want to look like you're already a successful author. You don't

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want to sound arrogant, but you do want to sound confident. Keep it to a single page. You don't want to waste anybody's time. They don't have enough. (Who does?)

If your bio is so bare of details that it's more of a liability than an asset, forget about it. Maybe your "bio" equals only a sentence or two, in which case you can work it into your query letter instead of a separate document.

Your goal, remember, is to get that editor to read your synopsis or manuscript. To judge it on its own merits. If he reads your writing and rejects it, you gave it your best shot. Try a few more, and if they all reject it, then think about improving your writing. But you don't want that editor to stop reading your submission before he gets to your writing. So, take the time to do the query letter and bio correctly.

Writing Your Synopsis

To quote one agent, "There is no such thing as a good synopsis." And how can there be? How do you sum up 50,000 or 100,000 words in a page or two? I'll tell you how I do it. Very badly.

Having said that, this is your first chance to show the publisher that you can write. Some publishers want a minimal amount of information on first contact (query letter, bio, synopsis). Others want to see the first chapter or two as well. Nobody wants to see the whole manuscript at first, except those who

say so in their writers' guidelines. If you include sample chapters, the chance of them being read depends largely on the quality of your query letter and synopsis.

Keep your synopsis short, two pages maximum unless the writers' guidelines say differently. Shorter is better. Pick out the theme and the strengths of your book and, in as clever a fashion as possible, relay these qualities in a brief chronology. The chronology is less important than the theme because, in truth, your only hope with a synopsis is that your theme or concept will strike a chord with the editor or agent reading it.

If your story is funny, your synopsis should be funny. If it is a romantic story, then your synopsis should be a romantic synopsis. You are a writer, and here is where you can be creative.

A lot of the great works of literature do not have easily defined stories, just fine writing and good characters. If you have no story, then you have to sell your idea. The synopsis must have fine, clear writing. Say how your book starts, how it ends, and what is the interest in the middle. This isn't the time to employ cliffhangers.

Your sample chapter should do the main talking, but your synopsis should offer up those clever memorable sound bites that will linger in the editor's mind and convince him to read the sample chapter.

Preparing Your Manuscript

Did I mention that your manuscript must be flawless? I'll mention it again. Your manuscript must be

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flawless. Especially be sure that the first chapters, the "hook" which you will submit, will be the type that grabs the reader and makes him/her/it wonder what happens next.

Beyond that, some mechanics:

If the publisher you're submitting to lists all this information in its guidelines, you're in luck. Do what they say and they'll read the manuscript. Fail to do so and they'll set it down unread, even if you're the next John Grisham.

Remember, they're budgeting their time and trying to get out of reading this stuff. Once they read it, they'll be fair. (If not, you don't want them.) If it's good solid writing, you're in. But until they get to the writing, they're always expecting the worst. If you'd seen some of the crap that comes their way, you'd be just as pessimistic. But in the end they do love good writing or else they'd quit that job.

If the guidelines don't tell you how to prepare the manuscript, consider the information below as a "generic template." Otherwise, ignore my guidelines and use theirs.

Fonts – UK publishers prefer Courier New 10pt, US publishers prefer Times New Roman 12pt. Both are trying to ease their eyestrain, so don't be fancy.

Paper sizes – This one's easy. Letter (8 1/2" by 11") in the US, A4 in the rest of the world.

(Hong Kong residents can find letter-size paper in Admiralty. City Office Supplies in Tower 1, Admiralty Center, sells it by the ream. Jumbo Grade on the first floor of Pacific Place sells packs of 50 or 100 sheets, I forget which. You can get to either store by taking train/bus/taxi/your car to Pacific Place.)

Binding – US publishers prefer none at all. UK publishers prefer that you punch two holes in the side and use simple brass fasteners to hold it all together – ugly but effective.

Use one type of paper throughout your presentation, preferably plain white. (If you have personal stationery that's not too funky, you can use that for the query letter.)

The title need not appear on the beginning of every chapter, but it's a good idea to put it on each page, along with your name and the page number, in case the manuscript is separated or mislaid at the publisher's.

Double-spaced text, unjustified right margins, one-inch margins all around. Include a stamped, self-addressed envelope (or self addressed envelope with IRCs) of the appropriate size if you want your manuscript back.

Package it so it's easy to open but not all wrinkled and nasty when it arrives at your publisher's office. No folded manuscripts hastily stuffed into a manila envelope. No envelopes that scatter hundreds of little brown paper shavings all over the desk. They're opening far too many of these things, and anything that looks "amateur" gets bumped unread.

Publisher List

contains the websites of almost 100 publishers.

I recommend visiting this after you've gone through the selection process, either from books you read or from a book such as **WRITERS MARKET**.

Agent List

When you select an agent, forget about who's closest to you. Think about who's closest to the publishers you're targeting. Those agents are more likely to know which publishers want which types of manuscripts, and they're also the ones who can lunch with the publisher instead of handling everything by mail or email or telephone.

Here's some advice from the Agent Research and Evaluation website. They define an agent as:

"...someone who makes a living selling real books to real publishers. No one representing himself as an agent should also claim to be a book doctor, an editor-for-hire, a book 'consultant' of any kind. They shouldn't charge any type of 'upfront' reading fee, marketing fee, evaluation fee or any other fee apart from a commission on work sold.

"With the possible exception of certain MINIMAL office expenses, legitimate agents NEVER handle [the expenses connected with submitting manuscripts] as an upfront cost. Only as a billable expense after being shown to have been incurred.

"Remember, real agents live off the commissions they make from selling their clients' projects. Scammers live off up-front fees for unnecessary, inadequate, or non-existent services."

This is excellent advice. Anyone can call himself an agent, get himself listed somewhere, and tell every author who sends him a manuscript "This is excellent. Send me some money and I'll sell it." Then he can pocket the author's money and do absolutely nothing.

Agents work for a percentage of your sales. It's usually 10%–20%. An agent's source of income must be the books he sells. If the author pays him before he closes a sale, where is his incentive to close the sale?

Insist that your agent send you copies of all rejection letters. A great agent should offer this without you asking, and those rejection letters shouldn't all be undated "Dear author" or "Dear agent" letters that don't mention you or your agent or your manuscript by name.

Your agent should also involve you in the selection process without you asking, even if that just means telling you "I'm sending to this, that, and the other place." Don't let him/her send your gothic romance to a children's publisher, etc.

If your agent is sending your stuff to the right places and it's still getting rejected, you've done all you

can do, except write better.

contains my list of resources for finding an agent in

the US or the UK. If you've been reading my other advice, you're already talking to other authors. If you know one who's made it into print, especially one who writes in your genre, ask which agent (and which publisher and editor) he or she used.

Warnings

Once you have narrowed down your list of prospects, visit the following sites to learn about the latest scams and such:

Beware Board

Editor Report

National Writers Union

Be sure to look at "Writer Alerts"

Preditors and Editors

Writer Beware

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Michael LaRocca's website at

was chosen by WRITER'S DIGEST as one

of The 101 Best Websites For Writers in 2001 and 2002. He published two novels in 2002 and has two more scheduled for publication in 2004. He also works as an editor for an e-publisher. He teaches English at a university in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China, and publishes the free weekly newsletter Mad About Books.

How Three Publishing Myths Kill the Author

By Judy Cullins

How Three Publishing Myths Kill the Author by Judy Cullins

Agents and publishing houses have their best interests at heart, not the author's. Save yourself from headaches, disappointments, and money down the drain. Become your own independent publisher

and produce your book faster and cheaper. All you need is a little help from professionals.

Myth: You need an agent or big publishing house to market your book and make big money.

Since big publishers don't look at unknown authors, now is the time to look at what they can do for you. Dan Poynter, self-publishing guru, says that if a publisher can't sell four times as many books as you can, you're better off selling it yourself. Self-publishing first is good because it acts as a test market for your book. If it sells well (over 10,000 in a year), publishers may be interested in your book. Traditional publishers and agents accept only 1–2% of authors' submissions, and even if you are one of the "chosen" you may not make much money after printing, bookstore, distributor, wholesaler and other expenses—probably \$2 on a \$14 book. Yes, you get an advance, but your sales must meet that and more. And after the initial book tour, the trainee marketing person is onto the next new author. Then, your books disappear from the bookstore shelf unless you, personally, devote a lot of time to marketing them.

Book Publishing is a new game today. Think self-publishing where the profits are all yours. Self-publishing is in. Thanks to Dan Poynter of the Self Publishing Manual for giving us permission to do part of the task ourselves. If you self-publish and decide to print, you need to print only the copies you need (5–500) with the new technology Print on Demand (POD). No more unsold cartons of books in your closets or garage. You print as you go leaving enough cash flow to market your book splendidly.

Myth: To be a respected author, you must invest thousands of hours of time on your full-length book.

The reality is that people today want concise and useful information. You don't have to write a 200–page book to be a real author. Remember The One–Minute Manager and the One–Minute Salesperson? Around one hundred pages. People want information

fast and convenient. Create short information products you can sell online, even if you don't have your own Web site.

If you choose to print your book with Print Quantity Needed (PQN), your perfect bound books will look as good as any book on the bookstore shelves.

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Myth: Authors must spend a lot of money to publish themselves. The printing costs for 1500 copies of a 160–page book might cost \$3000, about \$2 a unit. Small runs cost even more per unit. That's a lot of cash for anyone to put out all at once, and it's not worth it to many of us to use our home equity or life savings to finance our book. The answer is a small run with Print on Demand (POD) where you can print only 500 for around \$2.40 for 160 pages. Without the high inventory, you can maintain a comfortable cash flow.

You save even more money if you don't print your book. Book publishing is going Internet. You can write small books in less time, market them easily and inexpensively on the Web and reap profits sooner. Try an e–book. It can be downloaded, it takes no printing costs because your buyer prints or downloads it. You don't even have to have the whole book finished to sell it. Just include your table of contents at the end of each chapter and present it as an e–serial book.

Judy Cullins: author, publisher, book coach_Ten Non–techie Ways to Market Your Book Online__Write Your eBook or Other Short Book–Fast!_<http://www.bookcoaching.com/products.shtml>Subscribe to FREE ezine "The Book Coach Says..."<mailto:Judy@bookcoaching.com>

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