My Best Advice for Writers Who Aspire to Publication

by Claire M. Caterer

A funny thing happens when you finish a book, land an agent, get a publishing contract, or hit any one of a number of milestones en route to having a book in hand with your name on the cover: People think you are now a Publishing Insider. Or that you know the Secret Formula to Success.

Dirty little truth: I’m not, and I don’t.

But what advice I do have I’ll give you right here, for free, because people do ask me how to get published.

**Reading: It’s Critical**



During the years before I published, I read widely and deeply in my genre of choice. And I continue to do so. I read the best sellers (because there’s a reason they’re best sellers) and the lesser-known gems. I read award winners. I also try to read as much *outside* my genre as possible. I fall short, but I never stop trying. I consult book lists, book blogs, library recommendations, book clubs. It’s a serious part of my career. Stephen King once said, “If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have time (or the tools) to write.” Smart man.

**Writing: It’s Essential**

Writing a book takes work—preferably work that should be done every day. Revising a book is essential, not optional, and it should be done many, many times. My method was to write many books, many stories, over the course of many years. (Note my repetition of the word *many*. That isn’t accidental.)

**Once You Think You’re Done ...**

Put it away for three months. Read it again. Revise.

**Breaking Into Publishing (Or, Will You Send My Book to Your Agent?)**

Short answer: No.

I’m a newbie in this publishing game. I’m not qualified—nor do I have the chutzpah—to offer my friends’ newly minted manuscripts to my agent. I don’t know enough about what’s good or what the market will support, and frankly, I don’t know my agent well enough. If I’d been publishing for a dozen years and she was my best buddy, I’d be more comfortable doing that, but that’s not the case. So please, even if you are my best friend or the best writer on earth, don’t ask me to market your manuscript. I’ll just have to say no.

Maybe you’ve been told that getting a book published or finding an agent is all about who you know. It isn’t. It’s about researching which agents are accepting right now in your genre and writing a killer personal query letter directly to that agent. It’s also about being persistent.

**Step 1. Narrow Your Agent Search**

Begin your agent search with the resources noted at the end of this tip sheet. *Do not* send a blanket query to every agent, A-Z. It’s a waste of your time. Agents can tell right away if a query has not been tailored to them, and if they figure it out, they chuck the query without reading it. It sounds cruel, but the good agents are looking for reasons to reject your query. They simply have too many to read. Don’t give them an excuse to reject yours.

**Popular Agent Excuses to Reject Your Query Out of Hand**

1. You don’t personalize the query, as in “Dear Mr. Agent.”

2. You haven’t researched what genre the agent represents. An agent that represents adult lit only is NOT going to make an exception for your groundbreaking children’s book. She just isn’t.

3. You don’t follow the submission rules clearly stated on the agent’s website.

4. You spell her name wrong.

5. The query is full of basic typographical/grammatical errors that indicate you don’t know how to write.

**Step 2. Submit Your Query to Agents**

Once you have a good list of agents who represent your genre, the real work begins. Start with the top of your list. Let’s call her Agent A.

1. Google Agent A. Read as much as you can about her. Find interviews she’s done, or conferences she has presented at. Find out who else she represents. Are their books similar to yours? (If they are, good.) Look at lists of her favorite books from her childhood. Do they resonate with you? These are good items to note in your query.

2. If you still think Agent A is a good fit, go to Publisher’s Marketplace. What deals has she made in the last year or two? If she hasn’t been heard from for two or three years, you might wonder if she’s still operating. The problem with internet research is that it all looks current, but it isn’t. You may be looking at old information.

3. Still excited about Agent A? Go to her agency’s website. **This is critical.** Don’t rely on other sources to tell you how to submit to her. Many agents are forced to close their doors to submissions for some period of time every once in awhile; the website will give you the latest info available. **Pay attention to the rules.** If Agent A says she wants your first two chapters, submit that. If she says she wants only a query letter, submit that.

4. Write your query letter to Agent A. Compose it as if she were the only agent in the world you’d ever send your precious baby to, because it’s tailor-made for her. Do not tell her your novel is the next *Harry Potter*  or *Twilight* or [insert current best seller here], nor how big a pile of money you’re going to make for her. Don’t be arrogant. You’re a beginner.

5. Add Agent A’s contact info to a spreadsheet or database that you’ve prepared for this purpose. Note the date you submitted to her and the date you expect to hear from her. (The website may say something like, “Expect an answer in 3-6 weeks.”) Be aware that more and more often these days, agents use the “no answer means a rejection” method of response. Cold and disheartening? Yes. But that’s how it is.

6. Start the process all over again with Agent B. And so on.

**Step 3. Consider the Feedback (If Any)**

You will likely get lots of rejections (or that irritating silence) from the agents you query. Most will be form letters. Occasionally, you’ll get something like:

I really like your writing, but this one didn’t quite do it for me. Still, you’ve got promise. Please keep me in mind for your next project.

If you think this agent is being polite, let me disabuse you of that notion. **Agents don’t give authors any undue encouragement.** It’s like trying to stave off a pack of hyenas with a couple of White Castle sliders. Save that encouraging email. The agent may have just signed a similar project, or yours didn’t quite make the grade, but if he says submit again, **do submit again**—but not this project. Another one. And while you’re at it, attach the encouraging email to your next submission to him. If you have something else ready that you think he’ll like, great—shoot it right off to him while he still remembers who you are.

If you get responses from lots of people that say the same thing, **take the criticism seriously.** Like:

I love your writing, but the book is just too long for the market you’re aiming for. It should be half the length.

or:

It’s a great story, but I just don’t believe the main character’s motivation.

If an agent takes the time to give you feedback, she thinks your writing is worth saving. And if you get the same criticism from different people, seriously consider another revision.

**4. Be Prepared for the Long Haul.**

The process of researching and submitting to agents is not the quick-and-easy road to publishing fame. I queried more than a dozen agents and revised another time before signing a contract (10 months). Then my agent and I worked together on further revisions to my manuscript (9 months). He prepared the manuscript for submission and sent it around to various publishers until an editor accepted it (2-3 months). My editor and I worked on (yes) *more* revisions and all the other stuff that goes into publishing a book, resulting in a pub date *more than three years* after I began querying agents. If there’s a fast track, I don’t know about it. So stay the course. It does pay off.

**INVALUABLE RESOURCES**

**How to Write Great Query Letters:**

[from literary agent Michael Stearns](http://www.upstartcrowliterary.com/how-to-write-a-query-letter/)

**Where to Look for Agents**

[AgentQuery](http://www.agentquery.com/) (a searchable database of agents—what they’re looking for and how to contact them)

[Literary Rambles](http://www.literaryrambles.com/) (Casey McCormick’s invaluable blog, including query tips and interviews with agents)

**General Advice on Writing & the Publishing World**



There are loads of good blogs, but among the best is written by [Nathan Bransford](http://blog.nathanbransford.com/). Nathan is a children’s book author and former literary agent. His site has all kinds of great information on how to find an agent, how to revise your manuscript, how to write query letters, and so on. The archives are priceless, and the site is well organized. Begin at the left-hand column under the heading “Publishing Essentials.”

Another excellent site is the blog written by literary agent [Rachelle Gardner](http://www.rachellegardner.com/). Rachelle’s site is geared to helping anyone and everyone write better and submit smarter. In the right-hand column of the blog’s home page, look for “Popular Posts” for the basics.