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*Handouts and Resources*

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## **Fire Up Your Writing Brain: *How to Use Proven Neuroscience to Become a More Creative, Productive, and Successful Writer***

### **Susan Reynolds**

1. **Own the power of your brain.** We have 86 billion neurons; each can form as many as 15,000 synapses, gifting your brain the potential to form some 100 trillion synapses. Your brain has the capacity to develop over 100,000 miles of neuronal connections, enough to wrap around the world 4 times.
2. **Your brain has the ability to grow throughout your lifetime,** and you have the power to shape how it grows. The choices you make will inform your brain about what's important to you and the level of work you want to accomplish. If you choose to spend a lot of time watching TV instead of thinking, your brain will power down the minute you turn on the TV. However, if you power up and either read or write something challenging, your brain will rise to the occasion and step up its efforts to please you. You set the standard by using your conscious mind to choose. It's your brain to fire up or to waste.
3. **Your brain is dependent upon what you consciously choose to do to develop its maximum capacity.** If you do little to nothing to stimulate, nourish, protect, and expand your brain, it will remain stagnant. It's up to you how well your brain gets nourished, how much blood flow it receives, how well it's rested and allowed to process daily stimulation (both integrating and discarding events while you sleep), and how much it's stimulated in specific ways, for specific reasons.
4. **Create a small world network centralized around writing.** Your brain forms what one neuroscientist called a "vast neuronal forest of the cortex around what you do need, or choose." The cortex is the "thinking" part of your brain, and the way it works is that neurons stimulated around the same time or around the same subject tend to group together and form strong, interlinked networks that will then "fire together." If you build a vast neuronal forest around writing in general, you can bolster your writing skills significantly, simply because you've added lots of new trees and branches to what your brain knows about writing. And the more you fire up those webs, the better ideas you'll have while writing and the stronger the forest will grow.
5. **Link pleasure to writing.** Two things neuroscientists have discovered are that your brain actively seeks to please you and it responds to rewards. End all writing sessions with something that brings you pleasure (a chocolate, a cup of tea, a

phone call to your best friend, a walk, planting flowers, etc.) and your brain will release the “feel-good” chemicals that reward you, and the brain itself. Your brain craves those chemicals and thus will link writing with the pleasure, which will make it easier and easier to write.

6. **Read complex works that require you to decipher new material.** If the sentence structure or the new information is complex and causes you to have to read more slowly, with a focus on interpreting what you’re reading, your brain responds to your request for it to “work harder.” It’s like working a muscle, something that doesn’t occur if you never read anything that you have to struggle to understand or that introduces you to new concepts or new ways of thinking about things.
7. **Identify a higher purpose:** Your higher, thinking brain likes to have a clear purpose, a task that it can eagerly and intelligently perform, and, even more importantly, your brain wishes to please you, to please your higher self, if you will. When you ascribe a higher purpose to the work that you are asking your brain to do, it boosts the amount of energy your brain will expend. An effective way to tap into this richness is to journal about the reasons you are writing whatever you are writing.
8. **Commit in Writing:** When you identify the primary motivations related to your current project, journal about it, focusing on details, passions, and fears. By writing it down, you are programming your cerebral cortex and your hippocampus to remember that the story you are creating is important and that you are determined to complete it. You are also alerting your cortex that you’d like help anticipating and resolving problems and your “sleeping” subconscious that you’re asking it to offer its import. Before you begin brainstorming, read your entries to fire up all the neurons and synapses needed to do your best work.
9. **Immerse yourself in your senses.** Anything you can do to stimulate memories at the level of senses will fire up your brain and increase how quickly and how deeply your neuronal forest goes to work. Listen to music, find old clothes, cook favorite dishes or something your mother made, revisit setting, re-experience events. Remember to use all of your senses when seeking to remember and when writing. Music is a powerful tool for evoking memories, time periods, moods, and events. To dig deep into your memory chambers, listen to music that you associate with that time and then write down whatever thoughts pop into your head. Your brain will soon begin linking to more and more memories.

10. **Program your mind before you go to sleep at night.** While you sleep, your brain is busy processing everything you encountered that day, assessing whether or not memories or experiences are important enough to remember, and, if so, what they should be linked to in your memory. Spend a few minutes before going to sleep to pose story questions, request memories, or ask for inspiration, and particularly if you journal, or at the very least write those ideas or requests down, your brain will go to work while you sleep—often serving up an answer the next morning (keep a notebook or recorder by your bed to capture awakening thoughts).
11. **Spend 10-15 minutes in silence when you awaken.** Doing so will keep your mind open to thoughts bubbling up from your subconscious. If you can sit still and “meditate,” you will be creating the ideal environment for your brain to do exactly what you want it to do—have great ideas while you sleep.
12. **Create a “safe place” for your brain.** Your brain has a system that constantly monitors the environment for danger (tigers, lions, bears). If you create a “safe place” to write and acknowledge when you enter that space that you will be “safe from harm,” your monitoring system will power down. It’s also helpful to create and use rituals to transition from your everyday life to writing.

## **Are You A Top Or Bottom Brain Writer and Why It Matters**

### **Forget Left and Right; It’s now Top or Bottom**

As long ago as the 1970s, neuroscientists thought that you were either a left-brain (analytical) or right-brain (creative) thinker. While your brain does have distinct regions, the focus on left and right has been debunked because we all use both sides of our brains almost all the time. The role played by any given brain area is different depending on the state of the network of which it is currently a part, and how activity unfolds over time often matters more than where it is in the brain. Processing within each relies on a rich, dense network of connections, which then flow through a midline fiber tract known as your corpus callosum. Any natural tendencies you have for writing are not *right brain* but evidence that your hemispheres communicate very well indeed.

According to psychologist and neuroscientist Stephen Kosslyn, author of *Top Brain, Bottom Brain*, humans tend to be top-brain or bottom-brain centric, and my interpretation of his theory in relation to determining what kind of writer you tend to be is outlined here:

- Those who strongly favor the **top-brain system** collect information about their environment and their emotions to create and adhere to a strategic vision, using future input to make course corrections—they would tend to think their way through writing a book.
- Those who strongly rely on the **bottom-brain system** organize signals from their senses and compare them to what's stored in memory, and their emotions to interpret its significance and then figure out what the plan is—they would tend to feel their way through writing a book.

What you want to encourage is to use both your top and your bottom brain, to bolster communication between all brain areas.

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Amazon link: [http://www.amazon.com/Fire-Your-Writing-Brain-Neuroscience/dp/1599639149/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_swatch\\_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](http://www.amazon.com/Fire-Your-Writing-Brain-Neuroscience/dp/1599639149/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

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## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE STUCK WITHIN A SCENE

From *Writing Deep Scenes*, with Martha Alderson and Jordan Rosenfeld [www.writerpath.com](http://www.writerpath.com)

Every writer comes to a point (or several) when you feel stuck in a scene. You either

(1) becomes stuck inside the action of the scene, uncertain what to do to make it feel purposeful or move forward, or (2) don't know which scene to write next.

Let's address (1) first: When you're stuck inside a scene, you've most likely encountered one of the following issues:

- **You don't know your character's goal for the scene.** Every scene should build organically from the scene before. Your character needs a goal that sets up a new consequence for the next scene. If you haven't quite firmed up your character's goals, you may find yourself stuck. Go back, determine her goal (often just a "next step" in her plot journey), and then make sure the scene builds toward that goal.
- **You've made it too easy for her to reach her goal.** Good stories, from the quietest literary tale about speaking one's truth to the most epic of journeys to save the universe from evil, are built upon the conflict and trials that stretch and push characters or narrators to grow into their full power and possibility. If your character achieves what she's after without any challenge, your scenes will lack tension and will feel uneventful, causing readers to lose interest. If this is the case, ask yourself: In what ways can my character's flaws work against her? How can the antagonist post an obstacle or challenge in this scene? What is one way I can make this goal harder for her to obtain in this moment? Remember that challenging characters is one way to push them to marshal inner strength they may not yet be demonstrating in your story. In the case of memoir, you may have to consciously pick scenes that come from more challenging parts of your journey rather than just the "colorful" but easy ones you may have chosen.
- **You've given your character too difficult an obstacle, thus preventing her from reaching her goal when she needs to.** Every obstacle in a story should be, as screenwriter Michael Hague says, "a seemingly insurmountable" obstacle. This means that while the reader may not, at this moment, see how your character is going to get out of this tough situation, you, the author, have engineered a surprise or twist, possibly involving the character's hidden strength or resourcefulness, the unexpected aid of an ally, or an oversight on the part of the antagonist. However, if you make obstacles too hard, such that your character loses hope or you must rely upon *deus ex machina* (Latin for "God in the

machine,” which refers to implausible, easy, or magical fixes to plot obstacles), you stretch plausibility and fatigue your reader. In addition to conquering larger obstacles, your character does need to achieve smaller goals, such as making new friends, journeying to a new land, or taking on a task.

In a memoir, if your own journey was one of constant crisis and struggle, you may have to do triage to pick the most potent events rather than sharing every single trial with your reader. Even memoir is a crafted experience.

- **You don't know which scene to write next.** Staying true to the Energetic Markers (key plot points) of your story cuts down drastically on the guesswork. Each scene is simply another milestone on the character's journey toward the next marker, and each phase between markers finds her either more in the shadows or closer to the light. If you launch your story with a strong Point of No Return scene or scenes, your protagonist's beginning will flow organically into her middle. If you understand the purpose of the Rededication Marker, then the middle will not sag but deepen and become more complex, build to a natural Dark Night, and then rise again to a Triumph that makes sense for your protagonist and your story.

Follow the energy from start to finish, through all three layers, in every scene.

## 15 Tips How to Write a Memoir with a Blockbuster Plot

### **BLOCKBUSTER**

**B**egin by knowing how you'll show yourself at the climax

**L**ocate what your story says about life, the deeper meaning

**O**pen your memoir with you minus the skills, strengths & abilities you'll need at the climax

**C**ommit to the primary plot of your story

**K**now who carries the emotional weight of your story, the heart

**B**reak your memoir into ¼ The Beginning, ½ The Middle, ¼ The End

**U**se your flaw to interfere with reaching your goal

**S**tart at the end and plot your way backwards

**T**urn episodic events into scenes with cause and effect

**R**ather than tell your backstory in summary, "show" what you unable to do

### **PLOT**

**P**lot the territory of the antagonist in the middle of your memoir as an exotic world to you

**L**ove 1st ideas that come to you & then replace those ideas with depth more closely tied thematically to the whole

**O**ptimize your development by keeping an eye out for the gift you bring

**T**ake your memoir all the way to end before going back and starting again

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Martha Alderson is the bestselling author of *The Plot Whisperer: Secrets of Story Structure Any Writer Can Master*. *The Plot Whisperer Work book: Step-by-Step Exercises to Help You Create Compelling Stories*; *The Plot Whisperer Book of Writing Prompts*. Her most recent book: *Writing Deep Scenes: Plotting Your Story Through Action, Emotion & Theme* with Jordan Rosenfeld. Visit her website for consultations, writing retreats and more: <http://marthaalderson.com>



# **Finding an Agent, Query Letters, and Book Proposals**

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## Before You Start Writing Your Book, Ask Yourself These Questions

As an agent, I see a lot of non-fiction book proposals based on wishful thinking about whether a project is publishable. If writers asked themselves some basic questions before beginning the process, they would save some time and grief. They would either refine their concept into one that is attractive as a commercial publishing venture, or they would realize the idea is ill-conceived or possibly destined for self-publishing. Here are some questions you should be asking yourself.

**1. How many books am I trying to write?** You have no idea how often I speak to prospective authors who can't decide which of their many fabulous ideas they want to write about. So they try to shoehorn all of them into a single book. I see book proposals beginning with sentences like this: "My book is a self-help book about curing back pain with elements of a memoir included." My advice. Save the memoir for the next book. I always sense a problem when the proposal announces the project "crosses genres." Yes, there are some successful cross-genre books, but more often the author is just being lazy and unwilling to choose what genre she really wants to write in. Publishers say they are looking for "fresh new voices," but if the voice is too fresh and too new, if the publisher is confused about the book's genre, if the bookseller can't visualize what section the book should be shelved in, then it's going to be tough for this book to find a home. I know. I bought books at Cody's for 30 years. When I couldn't figure out where I'd shelve a book, I tended not to order it.

**2. Is this a blog, not a book? Is this a long form article, not a book?** Editors are always sending me rejection letters based on these concerns. Everybody seems to be blogging now, and we'd like to take our precious material and put it all together into something that will make us some money. (I'm doing that right now.) There's also the added benefit that the hard work has already been done, and it just needs a little slicing and dicing. Publishers don't want books derived from blogs. Why would readers pay for stuff already available for free online? The question about whether the subject works better as a shorter journalistic piece is a little more complicated. But if your manuscript is less than 50,000 words, it's too short for a book. With e-books, publishers are exploring new formats and are doing projects with shorter word counts. We have to wait and see how that's going to sort out.

**3. Who are my readers and what do they care about?** This is the single most important question that needs to be addressed in an effective book proposal. In the world of commercial publishing, the reader is sovereign. I once tried to sell a self-help book about how to deal with a variety of office injuries, written by an author with good bona fides. It got rejected. Editors pointed out that readers who have back pain don't really care about how to treat repetitive stress syndrome. They want a book on back pain. The reader is selfish and self-absorbed. She wants you to speak to her concerns.

I also find a problem with book proposals that define their potential audience too broadly. I once got a proposal about women's health that described the potential audience as all women who care about their health. I pointed out this was not an audience. This was a demographic that included several billion people. This won't be helpful to a publisher attempting to decide whether there is going to be a wide general interest in the book. And it's likely to create delusions of grandeur on the part of the author.

**4. If there are no other books on this subject, is there possibly a reason?** Most authors think a great pitch is: "There are no other books out there like mine." For publishers, this begs the question of "why aren't there any?" And the answer for them is usually that there is no audience big enough to justify publishing on this subject. What publishers really want is a book idea on a subject that's been written about in other successful books. But you need to prove you have something special that will make this robust audience spend money to read what you have new to say. Every book proposal should have a "competitive analysis" section listing five or six comparable titles. The first thing an acquisition editor will do when reading the proposal is to look up the sales on these titles. Publishers all have subscriptions to Bookscan, the database that retrieves point of sale information on all titles in print. If the sales on your comp books are modest, it's a good indicator the audience isn't big enough to justify publishing your book.

**5. How different is my book, really, from all the others on the subject?** You need to ask yourself if the things distinguishing your book from all the others really make a difference to the reader and to the acquisition editor. This is important. You may have come up with an astoundingly original interpretation of Jefferson's role in the expansion of the young American republic. And it may have led to much bloviating and vitriol amongst the Jefferson scholars at the convention of the American Historical Association. Publishers aren't so subtle. Their evaluation of the proposal will probably begin and end with: "Sorry. We don't need another book about Jefferson." Or maybe something like: "Sorry. Barnes and Noble didn't order our last book about Jefferson."

**6. Do I have "platform?"** Publishers are obsessed with platform in our media-driven age. In non-fiction genres, platform is enormously important. And publishers' idea of platform is different from yours. I often tell audiences platform is either an endowed chair at Harvard or you're sleeping with Oprah's hairdresser (the latter is vastly preferable.) Being a local TV personality with an audience of 500,000 viewers is not impressive platform. It's "regional" unless your audience is in Manhattan. Then it's national. Winning the Pulitzer Prize is good platform if your project is about the subject you won the prize for (and if it isn't regional). A blog with 5000 views a month isn't platform. A blog with 50,000 views a month also isn't platform. Get the picture? Celebrities operate by their own rules. Nobel Laureates, presidential candidates, and Lindsey Lohan can write any nonsense they choose.

**7. Wouldn't this book make [ a great profile in *The New Yorker*? ] [a great movie?] [ a great subject for Oprah?]** The answer is easy. Maybe, maybe not. It probably won't happen, so stop dreaming and get realistic.

## Alan Rinzler on the Work of the Freelance Editor

Since I often tell people that they need a freelance editor, I thought it was time to try to get to understand the process a little better and to find out what a freelance editor can and can't do. So I decided to interview my friend and freelance editor, Alan Rinzler. Alan was a legendary figure in publishing for almost 50 years. He worked with such writers as: Tony Morrison, Hunter Thompson, Tom Robbins, and Dee Brown. Alan has his own blog called: The Book Deal. It has a lot of information that you, gentle reader and writer, need to read!

**Andy:** Alan, starting with the fundamentals. What is the difference between line editing, copy editing and developmental editing?

**Alan:** Copy editing is a process of technical correction done by free-lance professionals with an obsession for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formal style – none of which I have. All publishers depend on outside copyeditors who do yeoman work on correcting errors and hopefully but not always checking facts.

Developmental editing is line editing, changing and polishing the text, but also larger conceptual problems like story, plot structure, characterization, visual description and other big picture choices and necessary revisions. The developmental editor has to enter the consciousness of the author and help make the book better wherever it needs it. This may mean suggesting language for new material including dialogue. Or it may take the form of requests for explanation and amplification that only the author can supply.

**Andy:** When I first started as an agent, I used to get rejection letters saying that the acquisition editor "just didn't fall in love" with the project. This didn't give me or the author any real sense of where to proceed from there. Now I'm hearing that a book under submission "doesn't have a robust narrative arc." I sort of understand what this means. But it is more like, "I know it when I see it." Can you explain what editors mean by "narrative arc"? What are the pitfalls writers fall into? And how do you work to improve this?

**Alan:** Acquisition editors are usually in a big hurry and don't take the time to explain why they don't like something. It may be for very idiosyncratic reasons that have nothing to do with the book itself, like their board or sales department is cranky this Tuesday, or they already have a book just like this, or they hate people named "Nancy" or "Harold," who knows, but they say whatever comes to mind and forget about it.

Jargon like "robust narrative arc," however, actually means something. All narratives, fiction or nonfiction, should have a beginning, middle, and end. You know: Act One, boys meets girl, John Adams meets Thomas Jefferson; Act Two, they quarrel and become alienated. Act Three, everyone kisses and makes up, including

John and Thomas. Proposals need to show this progression or the story doesn't usually work unless you're James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon, and I'm not really sure about their sales these days either.

Unfortunately, however, when an editor plays the narrative arc card, it may still be an act of avoidance and obfuscation. The reasons may actually be because they're fighting with their marketing manager and can only submit a presold brand name guaranteed best seller for their next proposals meeting. But "doesn't have a robust narrative arc" sounds a lot smarter.

**Andy:** You are a freelance editor, and I know you enjoy working with fiction. What are the kinds of flaws that you frequently encounter with fiction writers. How do you work to improve them? Do you try to get them to improve their literary values? Do you try to make them more suitable for a publisher? Are these goals at odds with each other?

**Alan:** I'm glad you asked because it's uncanny how many draft novels have very weak and boring opening sentences, paragraphs and pages, which make you want to stop reading and lie down immediately. Or huge information dumps, meaning tedious back story explanations of what happened before the book started and who are two dozen characters and their ancestors. Another common flaw is no dialogue, all telling what's happening from a distance. Or dialogue where all the characters talk like the same person and you can't tell them apart. Or all dialogue and no visual description, no pause between quotes to explain what else is going on, where they are, and what they might be feeling internally.

Another major flaw for many beginning writers is too much material, stories that are hugely but unnecessarily complex, flashbacks within flashbacks so you can't tell where or when anything is taking place, and a general sense of a writer being unfocused and overwhelmed by his material.

As a developmental editor I go through page by page making deletions, edits, polishes, suggesting specific new language and material, and requesting explanation or amplification for text that only the author can supply.

I don't think this approach is at all unsuitable for either the author or potential publisher since their goals are the same: to publish a good book that sells copies.

**Andy:** What about other non-fiction genres: narrative, social commentary, journalism, self-help? Do each of these (and others) have their own challenges and requirements?

**Alan:** The need to be original and directly competitive with prior books in the field is more essential a challenge in nonfiction. So many ideas and proposals I receive, even 400 page manuscripts, are almost exactly like something already written. Writers can save themselves a lot of grief if they do their homework and see what's

already out there on the same subject. And they need to be honest with themselves about doing something new and better in their own work.

Aside, from that, however, I edit non-fiction pretty much the same way as fiction. Nonfiction still has to tell a story that makes sense, like how to do it, here's the history, or this is what I believe about this or that – it's really all the same to me, except that you can use headings in nonfiction which I love, as signposts for topics and subtopics. You can also make lists, add boxes with side-bar materials, and use other techniques that wouldn't usually be appropriate for fiction.

**Andy:** As an agent, I am looking for 3 things: good concept, good platform, good writing. I like to tell people that the last of these is the easiest to deal with. I frequently refer them to an editor. Frequently, you. Am I just being glib here? Does your experience in publishing give you an inside track on how to improve writing to make it more attractive to the acquisition editor? And can you help them refine an imperfect concept as well?

**Alan:** I wouldn't put good writing last but first. And it's the hardest, not easiest, to deal with. Readers will usually put bad writing down, no matter how powerful the concept or big the platform. As a developmental editor I can make a million suggestions, half of which may be spot on, but they're all no good unless the author can write. I can definitely refine an imperfect concept and improve writing that isn't that bad to begin with. But no one can make a silk purse out of a proverbial sow's ear and anyone who says they can is a ghost writer not a developmental editor. Most authors don't want to use a ghost or co-author, but I do recommend it when there's no chance an author can produce writing that is at least an A minus level.

**Andy:** I'm always afraid when I tell a writer they could benefit from a freelance editor, they will take it as an insult. I tell them even the most experienced writers need a good editor. And frequently they submit their work to one as a matter of course. Am I right about this?

**Alan:** Yes. The best writers I've worked with all want high quality professional editing whenever and wherever they can get it, either before selling their books, or from the publishers once acquired. That goes for Toni Morrison, Tom Robbins, Hunter Thompson, Irv Yalom, Shirley MacLaine, Lenore Skenazy, Michael Gurian, Michele Borba – all writers I know. Tell your writers it's a compliment to say their book is worth editing, not an insult but a necessity.

**Andy:** And going back to your experience over the years in trade publishing, would you say publishers are less likely to accept a flawed book knowing they can doctor it up in the course of the editing process? It seems to me they are too busy to do this and want something publishable right out of the box.

**Alan:** Publishers are probably more willing to take a flawed book but they may not take the time to doctor it up, which is why so many books fail and lose money. You're right about them being too busy and wanting something right out of the box.

This is why free-lance developmental editors are often the only chance an author has to improve a flawed book that could do a lot better.



## Ann Lamott (and Albert Camus) on Writing

I just finished reading Anne Lamott's remarkable book about the process of writing, *Bird By Bird*. What a revelation! I don't know why I've never read it before. It was written in 1995. I must have sold 5000 copies at Cody's over the years. I know a lot of writers who have said that this book changed their life.

I suppose the reason I never read it is that I just didn't think deeply about the process of writing during my 35 years in retail. I read a lot and knew about what was going on in the book business. But by the time a book arrived at the store, the creative process was over.

So now I'm at the other end of the publishing food chain. I'm not exactly the midwife to the book; more like the Lamaze teacher. Now most of my work has to do with the process of writing. Well, actually I guess cutting deals enters into it as well.

Anyway, back to Anne Lamott. *Bird By Bird*. It is at times hysterically funny, wise, tough-minded but encouraging. She's secure enough as a writer to share with you her own experiences of her all-too-human insecurities about life in general and writing in particular.

Look at her 3rd chapter entitled: "Shitty First Drafts." I see a lot of these in the course of my work. It's always discouraging and frequently I just want to give up on the author. Lamott says these "shitty first drafts" are an inherent, even a necessary, part of the writing process. It allows the writer to get the material onto the page. The work of the accomplished author is finding the one sentence in the two shitty pages sitting in front of her that she will want to remember and use.

Lamott had a wonderful chapter on writing dialogue. I read it at about three o'clock in the morning and emailed my client immediately about some changes that needed to be made in her book proposal. You can't just write down a conversation between two people. The voices of the characters have to be differentiated in the dialogue. You can't just use dialogue to further the plot. It also has to deepen the character. Otherwise it's flat. But this makes dialogue devilishly hard to write.

One of the most spot-on chapters is about thoughts that get in the way of your writing. She calls it tuning in to radio station KFKD, or K-Fucked. She says: "station KFKD will play in your head twenty-four hours a day, nonstop, in stereo. Out of the right speaker will come the endless stream of self-aggrandizement. Out of the left speaker will be the rap songs of self-loathing." (God, I'm feeling that right now as I write).

Lamott also has a lot to say about getting published. This was especially poignant for me, since my job is actually to get my clients published. She said something wise: "Writing can give you what having a baby can give you: it can get you to start paying

attention, can help you soften, can wake you up. But publishing won't do any of those things...."

I think about this in my own work as an agent. I go to writers conferences around the country. I talk to a lot of writers. They send me their book proposals and writing samples. Then we have a meeting lasting for 15-30 minutes. I also usually participate in agents' panels at these conferences. And I have started giving some workshops on writing book proposals.

I found a couple of clients at these conferences. I was able to get one of them a publishing contract. But mostly I talk to people who are not going to get published. Fortunately there are more opportunities now to publish outside the channels of the big commercial houses. The pros and cons of self publishing is a complicated subject, but it's an option that never really existed before. And there are some spectacular success stories.

The writers at the conferences have poured their hearts and souls into these projects. And I don't doubt they have learned so much about themselves and the world in the process. Anne Lamott says this is the real value of writing.

Frequently I get evaluated by the participants after I give a workshop or presentation. Although I try to be realistic and emphasize the dismal reality of getting published, I take a lot of criticism for being unnecessarily discouraging to writers. After reading Anne Lamott, I think I would have to accept this criticism as valid.

When you really think about it, everyone is a hero in his own life story. Every memoir of a life is an epic. Paradoxically every person's life is larger than life. But this is quite different from the mundane and commercial considerations publishers consider in their decision to acquire a book.

What I've started telling writers, and what Anne Lamott has said so much better than I ever could, is that writing is an incredibly courageous undertaking. It's an activity that begins in the dark without any real knowledge of where the journey is destined to end. Or to use another metaphor of a race. Sometimes you will cross the finish line, receive the silver jug and go off into the sunset. But more often you will slip on a banana peel and break your leg 20 yards before the end of the race. But what an adventure it's been!

Which brings us to Camus. Albert Camus wrote his masterpiece, *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942. You probably had to read it in your freshman humanities course. Camus always took on the big themes, in this book -- the biggest of them all, the meaning of life. Sisyphus is condemned by the gods for all eternity to roll a boulder up a mountain, whence it will then roll down of its own weight. For Camus this was a metaphor of human life, a ceaseless striving in a universe without meaning.

It strikes me this is also a metaphor for the work of the writer. For Camus, Sisyphus's effort is heroic and filled with grandeur. In the final, unforgettable lines of his book, Camus says: " Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

## Elmore Leonard's Ten Rules For Writing

As an agent, I get a lot of fiction submissions. Usually I can tell if I don't like them by the end of the first page. Sometimes by the end of the first paragraph. I'm a little embarrassed to make this admission. Some people might think my method makes me a literary philistine. And, sure, there are lots of examples of masterpieces I probably would throw out because I was bored on page one or even page 10. Most of the great novels of the nineteenth century wouldn't pass muster. As an example, just look at Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. We all know the story, don't we? Well, in the likely event you loved the play or movie, as I did, you probably tried to read the book but gave up. The hero, Jean Valjean, doesn't even show up until about page 50. And the stuff before his entrance is deadeningly, crushingly boring.

When I talk to inexperienced writers, I usually tell them to read Elmore Leonard's 10 rules for writing. And if you don't treat the rules inflexibly, they are all sensible. We'll let Victor Hugo get by with a few peccadilloes. Well, actually *Les Mis* has about 800 pages of peccadilloes. So here is Leonard's list with my modest annotations:

**1. Never Open a book with a weather report.** We all remember the most celebrated bad first line in literature: "It was a dark and stormy night" from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford*. The novel was considered a masterpiece when written. Now it has become a subject of ridicule and condescension by high culture snoots. There isn't anything wrong with writing about the weather if you're building a scene. But for me this kind of beginning smacks of the equivalent of novelistic throat clearing, a sign the writer lacks the self-confidence to jump into the story. It's also hard to begin a novel this way without its sounding like a cliché.

**2. Avoid prologues.** Screenwriters love prologues. But then screenplays are usually about 20% as long as even the shortest novel. Movies have to get backstory information out quickly and concisely, and the prologue is an obvious vehicle for this. But novels are different. Again, prologues were ok in the nineteenth century. The most influential creative artist of the of the late nineteenth century was Richard Wagner. His masterpiece, *The Ring of the Niebelung*, runs for 4 nights and is over 14 hours long. The entire 2 1/2 hour first opera, *Das Rheingold*, is a classic prologue written entirely to bring out the backstory of the epic myth. Wagner gets to break the rules; but you, gentle writer, do not. Editors in New York are pretty demanding about how authors should handle backstory. They expect it to be dribbled out on a "need to know basis." Editors condescendingly refer to backstory prologues as "info dumps." Another sign of an inexperienced author.

**3. Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue.** Ok. This is a little extreme. I'm sure Elmore wouldn't have a problem with "asked" or "thought." But it's a good idea to avoid most other tags. Plain vanilla tags like "said" are

transparent to the reader and keep her attention on the dialogue and the story. More complex and descriptive tags like “he wondered” or “he mused” or “he regurgitated” [unless, of course, the character is actually tossing his cookie] are distracting. An exercise in “telling” rather than “showing.”

**4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb “said”...he admonished gravely.**

Same as rule #3 above. Adverbs tend to be clumsy and lazy. That said, I just finished rereading *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald loved adverbs. And who am I to criticize Fitzgerald? So, like Wagner, we’ll give him a literary “get out of jail free” card.

**5. Keep your exclamation points under control.** You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose. YOU HEAR THAT RULE, BUB?! You try using those exclamation points with me, and you’re outta here!!!

**6. Never use the words “suddenly” or “all hell broke loose.”** What Elmore is really saying here is you should avoid clichés like the plague (ha, ha. joke). Another sign of lazy writing. And you might also take the advice of Strunk and White and not use “weak” adjectives like “nice,” “beautiful,” or even “weak.”

**7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly.** Dad gummit! I agree with Elmore on this. It’s another example of how good style ought to be invisible. A novel should draw the reader into a kind of trance-like state. When the style distracts the reader from the story, she falls out of the story. I see a lot of stuff by inexperienced writers who are smitten by the need to flaunt their style. Excessive alliteration, misplaced similes, and metaphorical imagery. There are examples of great writing where style trumps substance, but in general this is a good rule.

**8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.** I’m not sure I would agree with this as a general rule. But what I think Elmore means is that characters are best described by their actions and their words in dialogue. Another admonition of “show, don’t tell.” But go ahead, you can break this rule if it works.

**9. Don’t go into great detail describing places and things.** I’d really like to make a snarky remark about Henry James right now, but I will forgo that temptation. As above, sometimes this rule is more honored in the breach than in the observance. Sure, if you are writing like Hemingway, Raymond Carver, or even Elmore Leonard, rule #9 is sound advice. But there is room for other styles in good writing. Certainly you should avoid unnecessary detail. Actually, you should avoid unnecessary anything.

**10. Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.** This rule speaks for itself --uh-- Henry James? Are you listening?

## Misconceptions About Literary Agents

Let's face it. Most of you who have never worked with a literary agent probably think that the 15% agency commission is sort of ...well...unfair. A kind of *baksheesh* paid to the middleman in the literary souk who can use his connections to get you access to the celebrity editor at Knopf. Most published writers will tell you otherwise. Check out the acknowledgements page at the back of any book. Authors love their agents, and recognize that the agent's work goes far beyond dickering over deal points.

Here are a few of the misconceptions about agents that seem to be going around in writers' circles.

**1) It's better to be represented by a New York agent.** Obviously I'm annoyed by this surprisingly widely held belief, since I live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area. A lot of writers seem to think that getting published is all about the agent's physical proximity to editors and the number of times per month they have lunch with them. The famous "publisher's lunch" is from another era. And it is unclear that this was an important ritual in the acquisition process even then. All of the editors I talk to will tell you that the key consideration of an acquisition decision is whether the book has commercial potential. Publishers are under incredible pressure from their multimedia conglomerate parent corporations to make money on every book they publish. If your book is a bad business proposition, no amount of martinis at lunch is going to convince the publisher otherwise. I talk to a lot of book editors even though I work in California. They tell me that the most important thing you can provide them with is a convincing book proposal. You don't have to be in New York to do that. But you do need a good agent to help you develop it.

**2) It's better to be represented by a big (prestigious) New York agency.** There are no good or bad agencies. There are just good or bad agents. That said, there are some advantages to having one of these big agencies on your side, but not the advantages that you might think. At the end of the day a celebrity agent isn't going to give you an edge, and can't deliver a contract for a project that would not otherwise get published. If you have a big book with lots of subsidiary rights opportunities (movie deals, foreign markets, merchandise tie-ins), it would be nice to have a big agency that could seamlessly handle all these deal elements. But even there, most good independent agents can serve you well.

And there is a downside to working with these big agencies. They are extremely selective in the projects they take on. A lot of these agencies are not looking for new writers. If you aren't a literary superstar, you might be better served by a newer

agent who is building a list and is willing to take some chances by seeking out new talent. And always, always, you are better served by an agent who has the time and the imagination to help you shape your ideas and the passion to believe in your talent. You want an agent who will not just flip a contract but who will work with you to develop your career as a writer. There are some very good agents at the big New York agencies who will do this and other agents who are just too busy. The same is true of independent agents.

**3) The agent's 15% commission is a rip off. It's payola to get your foot in the door.** Actually, sometimes that's true. I've heard a lot of stories about agents who have done very little other than send your proposal around (usually to the same ten editors they like to work with) and then either drop you or flip a contract and disappear. That's a bad agent. If you are going to give an agent a 15% commission, you might as well make sure that she is earning it. The work of an agent is a lot more than sending out your project and dickering over deal points. A good agent will help you refine your idea in a way that will make it easier to sell, will lead you through the book proposal process, may even provide detailed edits on your novel or memoir, will negotiate the contract, will be your advocate during the publishing process, will help you exploit all the subsidiary rights opportunities for the material in the book, and will advise you on promotion when the book comes out. They might even be able to get you tickets to the opera. A good agent will earn that 15%. So try to find one of those.

**4) I went with the agent who promised me the six figure deal.** Most of the agents I know won't do this, but I still hear about it from writers. It's pretty hard to predict what kind of publisher advance a project will draw these days. What I can predict is that the advance offers will be a whole lot lower than they were several years ago. It's important to have an agent whom you can trust. Anyone who employs this kind of enticement is pretty suspect.

**5) A good agent can get me a lot more money.** This is a little complicated. An agent can work with you to develop a concept that is more attractive (and valuable) to a publisher and can help you compose a book proposal that will generate excitement from an acquiring editor. If there is competition for your book from several publishers, an agent can employ some sophisticated bargaining strategies to help improve a deal offer. And an agent can negotiate contract terms that may address issues affecting future royalties. But if you are in a situation with only a single publisher making an offer, one must assume that the publisher knows in advance how much she is willing to pay for a project. The job of the agent is to find out what that number is. In spite of what they may tell you, agents are not in possession of alchemical powers that will turn lead into gold. An agent can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

**6) A good agent can help me find a prestigious editor.** This might or might not be true, but the real misconception is whether or not the writer will be better off with a "prestigious" editor. I believe that the best editor for a project is the editor who understands and believes in that project. This might be the editorial director of a large imprint, but it might also be a young assistant editor hungry for building a list. Recently I spoke to an author whose editor was one of these legendary guys in publishing. The author was unhappy, because he felt the editor didn't give him the time he needed. I believe that. I had one client who insisted that I only send his work to the most prestigious editors working at the most prestigious imprints, regardless of whether those editors had any interest in the subject being written about. One of the most common causes for rejection is: "this book doesn't really fit my list." A good agent will find you an editor who believes in your book. That is more important than having a superstar editor.

**7) Never work with an inexperienced agent.** Since I was an inexperienced agent not too long ago, I fully understand the downside of working with one. There are lots of things in book publishing that a person can only learn from experience. Fortunately I had been in the book business for 35 years when I became an agent and came onto the job knowing quite a bit, but there were still lots of holes in my knowledge. A lot of agents, many in the big agencies, might be young and inexperienced. But this is not always such a bad thing. Some of these agents are pretty sharp and have a good eye for a project. And they are more likely to take a chance on a new writer. In the book business, developing new talent is a thankless but important job and it usually falls to the agents who have not yet built their lists.

Do yourself a favor. Find an agent who earns his commission.



## Eleven Steps to Finding an Agent

I teach a class on finding and working with agents. A lot of prospective authors who attend the class are a little intimidated by the process and need to know the basics of agent research. So here are the steps you need to follow to find the right agent for your book.

**1. Decide if you really want to work with an agent in the first place.** Agents are going to charge a 15% commission on your income. Smaller publishers don't require agented submissions. Some even refuse to work with agents. Large publishers will almost never accept unagented submissions. And even when an editor from one of these houses is interested in your project, she might insist that you find an agent before proceeding with her.

**2. Make sure your project is ready to submit before seeking an agent.** If your book is non-fiction, have a complete and polished book proposal and sample chapter ready to go. If fiction, the manuscript must be in final form. (Frequently publishers will insist on a finished manuscript for memoir as well.) If you are preparing a book proposal, do your homework on how to write a good one. Read some books about it, attend some classes, or get a freelance editor to work with you. Books are acquired by publishers based on the proposal, and it has to answer the questions that the agents and publishers will be asking. Having a compelling idea isn't good enough. Agents have to know that the idea works as a book, not just as a magazine article or a blog. Publishers need to know that they will make money on this book.

**3. Be careful about bad agents and scammers.** Before preparing a prospective agent list, do a little research on things to watch out for. Check out the *Writer Beware* website. They have some very good advice on avoiding unscrupulous agents. <http://www.sfwaweb.org/for-authors/writer-beware/agents/>. It has good advice.

**4. Start doing research.** First you need to identify the agents who are most likely to be appropriate for your specific genre and project. Remember that you can and must send multiple submissions. Almost all authors, from Joe Schmo to J. K. Rowling, have gotten lots of rejections from agents before finding the right one. I recommend that you make a list of 25 agents who would seem to be a good fit and proceed from there. If none of them are interested, don't give up. Make another list and keep submitting.

**5. Start mining the data bases.** Start with the list of members of the Association of Author Representatives. The AAR is the trade association of literary agents and has some strict requirements for membership including a code of ethics. For a larger list, I recommend Agentquery.com. In all of these lists you can limit your search only to agents who are working in your genre. Most of the agents will have brief statements that give you a more subjective feel for their sensibilities. You can also get links to the agents' individual websites for further research.

**6. After you have developed a tentative list of agents, it's time to move on the the agents' websites.** Almost all agents have websites and almost all agent websites have a similar structure. You are likely to find:

- a page describing the agent's interests including a fuller description of the types of books she is looking for. Sometimes this will give you a better feel for the agent than simply a list of genres she works with. For instance, on Agentquery.com, it may list that an agent is seeking books in the YA genre. On the website you might find out that the agent is not interested in paranormal or fantasy YA, only realism or only books for girls with a romance theme. This is useful information.

- background information about the agent. This might include her education, previous occupations, honors and awards, and personal interests. Sometimes you want to go with your feelings on this. Your relationship with your agent will be very personal.

- A list of books that the agent represents and/or recent book deals. It's important for you to see if these books seem compatible with your project. An agent whose list is primarily cookbooks might not be the best agent to represent your political journalism. But you need to find out if that agent in moving into other areas that would be more appropriate for you.

- Submission guidelines. This is crucial. Every agent website will have a page on submission guidelines that will tell you: how much and what information she wants in query letters, whether submissions should be electronic or paper, some specific requirements about book proposals, and how long you can expect to wait before hearing back.

If you want to dwell deeper into the dark recesses of an agent's mind and soul, some agents will have blogs that could be revealing and always provide useful tips for prospective authors. Check out my blog at: <http://andyrossagency.wordpress.com>.

**8. Next compose your query letter.** The number of articles, books, and podcasts on this subject is legion. It is important to present your query in a format that is familiar to an agent, that provides the specific information an agent is looking for, and in a style that is clear and intelligible. Always sound professional. Never indicate that you suffer delusions of omnipotence. (Avoid mentioning: Oprah; *Eat, Pray, Love*; or movie deals.) Don't be dumb. (Don't say you are offering a "literary fiction novel". That's redundant. And for God sake, don't say you have written a "narrative non-fiction novel".)

**9. Be prepared to wait.** Response times are all over the map. I generally read queries every day and respond within 4 or 5 days. Other agents may take weeks or even months. Usually agents will give an indication on their website how long they take to respond. And....a lot of agents aren't going to respond at all. It's rude, but that's life. Don't expect agents to give you incisive advice on how to rewrite your book. And don't ask them to refer you to other agents. You need to do your own research. Agents get 10-100 queries a day. Rejections tend to be pro forma. I

recommend that after a few weeks, start sending out more query letters. It's ok to send a follow-up after a month or two though.

**10. If an agent is interested in your project, be responsive.** If your project is non-fiction, she will usually ask for a complete book proposal. If it's fiction, an agent will usually ask for the first 10-50 pages. And those 10 pages had better be good. Most agents and editors can tell good writing by the end of the first paragraph. If the agent gets excited, she will ask for the complete manuscript.

**11. If you are in the enviable position of having interest from multiple agents, you can and should do your due diligence.** Ask for references from other authors the agents have represented. If an agent tells you she can get you a 6 figure deal, she's probably lying. She doesn't know. That's a bad sign. Having a New York agent is no longer important. Having an agent from a big agency is less important than having a good agent who believes in you.

**12. You will get rejected. Don't get discouraged.** Don't give up. You will probably get rejected by dozens of agents. Get used to it. Authors get rejected by agents; agents get rejected by publishers; publishers get rejected by book sellers; and booksellers get rejected by consumers. That's show business.

## AGENT RESOURCES FOR WRITERS

(a partial list)

### Agent lists

**Association of Author Representatives:** <http://aaronline.org/>

This is the trade association of literary agents. It includes a list of all members along with a search and sort engine. This list is small (about 150 agents). But to become a member of the association, you have to have sold more than 10 books in 18 months. One can't gain membership without letters of reference from 2 other members. There is a very strict code of ethics that the members agree to. A lot of reputable and successful agents have chosen not to join AAR, but one can assume that the list excludes marginal and shady agents.

**Agentquery.com:** <http://www.agentquery.com/>

This is a very good website that includes an excellent search engine and detailed profiles of all agents that are included. The list is selective but much larger than the membership list of AAR. You can find newer agents who may not qualify for membership in AAR, but who may be hungrier for less established authors and less obviously commercial projects. The listings are pretty complete and also include extremely successful agents who have chosen not to join AAR.

**Preditors and Editors:** <http://pred-ed.com/>

This is a quirky site that has a long list of agents annotated with cautions against certain agencies. P&E frequently gives details about why these "not recommended" agents have received this dubious honor. Some of these examples are pretty gruesome. The site explains criteria for including a negative rating. Criteria include : agent charges fees, has burdensome engagement agreements, has tie-in arrangements with other fee charging entities, and a whole lot more. Some agencies have special "recommended" notations. But it is unclear what the criteria is for these qualifiers.

**Querytracking.com :** <http://querytracker.net/>

. Querytracker has a decent agent data base and some good information that will be useful for writers. It also has some interesting tracking information with statistics about how responsive a particular agent is with unsolicited queries. I'd take these

statistics with a grain of salt. It is usually based on a very small sample by writers who take the time to report back to this site. Example. My report is based on 105 responses sent to the site over a period of 3 years. That is about as many queries as I receive every in a week. So this is not a particularly robust sample. They also have some nifty chat rooms for authors. For \$25 per year, you can receive their premium membership that offers some more reports and services. I generally advise against spending money on any of the sites. The information is usually available for free elsewhere.

## **Websites with Information on working with Agents**

**Guide to Literary Agents:** <http://www.guidetoliteraryagents.com/blog/>

This is a terrific blog run by Chuck Sambucino. It has a lot of interviews with agents offering tips to writers. It has a good list of agent blogs as well. Many of them have useful advice for writers seeking agents.

**Writers Beware:** <http://www.sfwaworld.com/for-authors/writer-beware/>

This is not a list of agents. Rather it is a very good free resource that gives comprehensive advice on how to avoid scams by agents, editors, and publishers, along with good legal advice on your recourses. Some of this information is also available on other sites that we discussed above. But this one is particularly complete. It is on the site of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, but the information applies to all writers in all genres.

## **Industry websites**

**Publishers weekly** <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/home/index.html>

PW is the magazine for the publishing industry and has the best information around on news.

**Publishers Marketplace:** <http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/>

This is a fantastic site for publishing professionals. I look at it many times a day. The free version is called "Publishers Lunch" and has publishing news, selected new deal announcements and other useful information. There is also a subscription version for \$20 per month that has a more complete deal report and a vast amount of contact information on agents, editors, publisher. And lots more.

For additional links to web sites and blogs with industry information and with resources for writers, visit my blog, "Ask the Agent" at [www.andyrossagency.wordpress.com](http://www.andyrossagency.wordpress.com).

## **Books Recommended:**

*How to Get a Literary Agent*, Michael Larsen, (Sourcebooks)

*The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published*, Areille Eckstut and David Henry Sterry (Workman)

*How to Write a Book Proposal*, Michael Larsen (Writers Digest)

*Write That Book Already: The Tough Love You Need to Get Published Now*, Sam Barry and Kathi Goldmark (Adams Media)

## **Organizations to Join**

Authors Guild

## Five Tips for Writing and Sending Query Letters

Every year I give classes and make presentations at writers' conferences all over the country. Whenever I do, I get questions about how to write effective query letters. There's plenty of advice about writing queries all over the Internet and in magazines like *Writer's Digest*. So this information is widely available. But there's also plenty of misinformation and bad advice going around. It usually comes from people who promise sure-fire success getting published if only the writer will follow a certain technique. Don't buy that for one minute. The only road to success in publishing (and it is by no means sure-fire) is by developing a good project, writing it well, and having the platform to get attention from an audience of readers. There is no kabalistic knowledge or technique that will bring you closer to getting an agent.

These tips are what work for me. Other agents will likely see things differently.

**1. Keep the query short.** I like less than half page for the entire query. Save the rest of the information for the book proposal. Remember agents are getting hundreds of unsolicited queries a month. Chances are they will be spending about 10 seconds deciding whether they want to follow up with you. Use those 10 seconds effectively to provide the information the agent needs.

**2. Answer the key questions: What? Why? Who?** What is the genre? What is the book about? Why does it need to be published? Who am I to have the authority to write it? And remember that in this day and age "platform" is everything in commercial publishing, so most agents will look for your qualifications first.

**3. Be professional and sound professional.** Writing for publication is a business as well as an art. Familiarize yourself with the proper terminology and terms of art in publishing. When you specify the genre of your project in the query, make sure you know what the standard genres are.

**4. Be transparent. Avoid hype.** After hearing thousands of pitches, agents have pretty good bullshit detectors. A query brimming with hyperbole sends a message to me that the author is either imbued with grandiose delusions or playing me for a fool. Neither of these messages bodes well for a happy author-agent relationship.

**5. Writing queries isn't hard. Don't get intimidated.** Don't freak out. Chances are you didn't need to read this list of tips to write an effective query. Agents are all looking for good projects that have a chance of finding a publisher. We aren't going to reject one of those projects because the query diverges from a desired format. Sure. You don't want to write an unintelligible query letter. That usually means that you have an unintelligible project. But if you have a great idea and are the right person to write it, I'm going to discover that regardless of the form of the query.

## How Not to Freak Out and Get Humiliated When Pitching to Agents

I just got back from the writers conference at San Miguel de Allende. The city was voted the number one travel destination in the world by *Condé Nast Traveler*. And I would rate this writers conference number one in the world as well.

As usual, I took a lot of pitches from writers. As usual, they were pretty nervous when they sat down. And probably some were pretty disappointed when I told them I didn't want to represent their book. As usual, a lot of talented people showed me some good writing, but I knew I wouldn't be able to sell it to a publisher. Of course, nowadays there are lots of alternatives to mainline commercial publishing. And writers are exploring these alternatives.

When it comes to rejection, I'm a real wussy. I don't think I could ever pitch my writing to an agent. I'm amazed at how courageous writers are, and I always feel shame when I know that I have hurt someone with a rejection. In my job, I get plenty of rejection letters from editors in response to my submissions. I estimate I have received over 5000 in my few years at this job. Sometimes it seems a little like my social life in high school. (See my blog post on *Publishers' Rejection Letters From Plato to Hitler*.)

Many of the pitches at San Miguel were for memoirs and novels. Here's what I can tell you about how publishers evaluate these genres. So many of the published memoirs are driven by celebrity. These are, in reality, book-like glitzy packages, usually written by someone other than the putative author. For those of you who like that kind of book, I refer you to *Kardashian Confidential*, St. Martin's Press (2010), written by God only knows who. For the rest of us, it's almost impossible to find a publisher for a personal memoir. Certainly there are some examples of family memoirs that have succeeded. *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls comes to mind. Or *The Liar's Club* by Mary Karr. These books rise to the level of high literature. They're the exceptions though, and I can only imagine the difficulty they must have had finding a publisher. I've represented some very good memoirs. Yes. As good as *The Liar's Club*. I couldn't get them published. No dishonor. Just disappointment.

Similarly with fiction. And I have written about this as well in a previous blog post. Literary fiction is especially difficult to get published for the simple reason that it rarely sells enough to be a profitable venture. Most editors evaluate 200-500 novels a year. All of them have been heavily vetted by agents. Most of them are good enough to get published. An editor may acquire 10. And the rejection is usually based on marketing, not on aesthetics. ("This book is too dark for book groups." -- "This book seems too quiet.") As a result I only represent a few novels a year. Most of the greatest novelists of our time have experienced these kinds of rejections.



Some agents are nice guys and have a warm and fuzzy vibe. Others may seem dour, forbidding cynical, and world weary. If you are fearful of laying yourself wide open to an agent, here's what I recommend: Don't even try to pitch your book. It's probably more effective sending an agent a query letter and a sample when they get back to the office. Instead, just ask them some questions. Agents know about the publishing process and the market, and you can learn a lot by having a conversation with them. Ask them what they are looking for when they read a memoir or a novel. Ask them what turns them on and what turns them off. Ask them for advice about finding the right agent. Try to find out what agents and editors are talking about with each other. Ask them what grabs their attention in the first paragraph. The information will be invaluable. And you won't have to suffer the indignity of a face-to-face rejection. Of course, ask them at the end if you can send them a query and submission. More than likely they will put it at the top of their queue.

Most writers who attended the conference at San Miguel de Allende, most writers who pitch to agents at any conference, aren't going to find a home with a big New York publisher. But it's important to remember that the writing, itself, is the end, not the means. It's the journey that counts. And a few people will reach the end and receive the gold cup. More likely though you will slip on a banana peel ten feet from the finish line. Ah, but what a trip it's been. How much you must have grown in the process. Writing is a profound journey of discovery. Publication, well, it's a business transaction.

Nobody said it better than Ann Lamott in *Bird by Bird*. She tells us:

"...publication is not all it's cracked up to be. But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing you had to force yourself to do -- the actual act of writing -- turns out to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward."

## Think Like an Editor – Nine Tips on Writing Book Proposals

Book publishing is run like real business now. The six largest publishers are all owned by multimedia conglomerates. The corporate bosses have high expectations for return on investment, far higher than in the old days when book publishing was a cottage industry. Accordingly editors are under intense pressure to acquire books that will make money -- a lot of money.

For non-fiction titles, the acquisition decision is primarily based on the material contained in the book proposal. A bad book proposal can kill a good book idea. Well, maybe if you are Kim Kardashian, you can get away with a lousy proposal or none at all. But gentle reader, don't fool yourself. You are not Kim Kardashian (thank God!). A good book proposal is an honest book proposal and one that will address the concerns of the editor and give her confidence the book will meet her expectations and requirements. Put yourself in her shoes for a minute and it will help you write a better proposal.

**1. A book proposal is a business plan.** There is the old saying that publishing is the marriage of art and commerce. At the moment the relationship is sort of S/M with commerce holding the whip. Never forget an editor's acquisition is a business decision and your proposal must convince the editor your book is not just great writing. It is good business as well.

**2. Get the editor hooked right out of the gate.** An editor's life isn't all that glamorous. She works in a 10' x 10' office all day, every day. She has to attend boring acquisition meetings with a bunch of other fatuous editors who are pitching their pet projects for the same slot as hers. The publisher, the sales director, and the marketing manager are all there too. Maybe they have read your proposal. Maybe they have only read the first page. Maybe they have only read your agent's pitch letter. Everyone in the room including your acquisition editor has a busy life that engenders a kind of attention deficit disorder. If you can't get them excited in the first two paragraphs, I'm sorry, but you are probably sunk. Your writing in the first paragraph has to be sparkling. And you need to be able to say what the book is about in one or two sentences. If you can't, you probably haven't figured that out yourself. And remember, you have a lot of competition. An acquisition editor gets 10 proposals a week. Every one of those proposals has been heavily vetted by agents. They will all have a compelling reason to get published. What will make yours pop out?

**3. Don't play the editor for a fool.** Editors have seen every kind of hype you can think of many times over. Just remember this. Don't mention *Eat, Pray, Love*. Don't mention Oprah, and while you are at it, don't mention Terry Gross. Don't mention *The New Yorker*. Don't mention Spielberg either. When you talk about your promotion opportunities, don't use the word "might" (as in "I might get on Oprah.") Editors will read this as "might not" or more likely "doesn't have a chance in hell."

This kind of hype sends a message you are either dishonest or deluded. Neither of these are good messages to send.

**4. Focus on your competitive analysis.** Many writers gloss over the competitive analysis and treat it as if it were an unpleasant exercise one must get through in order to please her agent. Don't fool yourself. Editors look carefully at this, because it gives them important information about the potential audience for the book. The editor is looking to see if there are other books on the subject that have had impressive sales. But they also want to know you have something new and important to say on the subject. Try to use comp titles that will be useful to the editor in evaluating whether there is an audience. Use books from major publishers that were successful. Don't use books that flopped. Don't use books that are so old they are irrelevant to the editor's analysis. Don't use books that aren't truly comparable. And, for God's sake, don't use self-published books. One last thing, remember: never say your book is totally unique and the only book on the subject. This tells the editor there's most likely no audience for it.

**5. Your audience analysis must be realistic and robust.** The audience analysis section of the proposal is also an area authors give short shrift to. When an editor looks at a proposal, the first question she will ask herself is, "Is there an audience for this book?" In the audience analysis section, you need to answer this in a compelling manner that shows you mean business and are not acting under your own illusions or just blowing smoke. If you're writing a book about menopause, for instance, you can't just say it will appeal to all women interested in health. This is about 4 billion people, and most of them aren't going to buy your book.

**6. When writing your bio, think like an editor.** The editor will read your bio and be looking for these two things. 1) Does the author have the authority to be writing about this subject? and 2) What kind of platform does the author have that will allow her to drive sales? This should not be a curriculum vitae (although if you have one, you may include it in an appendix). You will have to describe the work you do in the real world. You will have to include a modest list of important books and articles --if such a list exists -- that you have written and published. You should include media connections past and present. You must mention major venues where you have spoken and will be speaking at, and any significant awards you have received. Don't put in filler material that will not impress anyone. Don't say you will teach a class on the subject at your local junior college. Don't say you came in 3rd in an unknown literary contest. Don't pretend you have a platform when you don't. [See #3 above]

**7. Impress the editor with a solid, realistic, effective and honest marketing and promotion plan.** The marketing and promotion section of the proposal is another area where authors have difficulty and sometimes try to wing it. Don't. Editors will be able to see whether you have a sophisticated understanding of marketing and promotion, whether you will do an effective job flogging your product, or whether you are naïve. Show the editor you have a good plan. Go into some detail. Don't say "I will do Internet marketing." That's not specific enough.

Don't say, "I will try to get interviews on my local radio station." Tell them exactly what media events you will realistically be able to line up – and don't lie about it. Don't mention that you will have book signings at local bookstores. They already know this. Don't say your mom will host a publication party.

**8. Don't suffer delusions of grandeur.** This is primarily for those of you out there who are writing memoirs, but it applies to everyone. Don't get me wrong. Memoirs are a popular genre but they are hard to get published. Everyone's life is a hero's journey. But this doesn't mean there is an audience who will want to read about it or a publisher who will see it as a marketable commodity. At a recent writers' conference I heard Sheryl Strayed, author of the best-selling memoir, *Wild*, speak about writing memoir. She said the hard part is learning how to tell the story, not just having a good story to tell. I call this "the whatness of the how." A good story well told. That's what editors are looking for and that's what readers want to read. Again, think like an editor.

**9. I want to say one word to you, just one word: "transparency."** This is my golden rule of proposal writing. The editor must know when he has finished the proposal that everything in it is true and deliverable before and after publication and that the author is who he says he is and has the authority, connections, and savvy to make this book sell. I need to trust my author just as she needs to trust me. And the editor needs to trust both of us.

## Platform is More Than Just a Website and a Blog

There is a lot of nonsense about platform floating around. You hear about it from motivational speakers at writers conferences, and you read about it in "tip" pieces in magazines and blogs directed at writers. I see consultants charging hefty fees to tell you how to "create your own platform."

There's really nothing wrong with this advice. Most of these tips are true and useful. Yes, it's helpful to set up a blog and, if you are going to have a book published, you will need a website. You should mine the social media. Face-book is de rigeur. Some people swear by Twitter; although when I set up my Twitter account, I only seemed to get invitations from prostitutes.

The problem is most of this advice is motivational, inspired by the gospel of "positive thinking," and frequently deceptive. The subtext of much of this is that if you follow a few simple tips, you can develop a platform that will be the key to getting your book published. This is not true. Book publishers have set a high bar for platform. A robust platform is not just a blog, a website, and a twitter account, even if your friends and followers are legion.

A syndicated *New York Times* columnist has an impressive platform. A holder of a chaired professorship at Harvard has an impressive platform, but only if she is writing in her specialized field and only if the subject is going to interest a wide non-academic audience. Unlike the Harvard professor, a Nobel laureate has an impressive platform and can pretty much pontificate about any old nonsense that suits his fancy. A Pulitzer Prize winner has an impressive platform, but he also needs a book idea a publisher thinks will make money. I've gotten rejections from publishers for books by Pulitzer Prize winners.

A popular blog or website with a lot of hits may or may not be an impressive platform. I had a client whose website got 75,000 views per month. But I couldn't get a book contract for him. And no matter how popular your blog is, book publishers do not want to recycle your blog posts. How can they justify charging money for material that is being given away for free?

A television or media personality has an impressive platform. But if his platform is regional, this makes the author less appealing. Publishers are wary of regional titles. However national media celebrities, especially those with a certain kind of reputation, especially those whose tawdry personal lives you read about while checking out your groceries, especially those who have no reason for being famous other than the fact that they are famous -- now that is the platinum standard for platform. If I were the agent for the Sisters Kardashian, I'd be on easy street. I could afford a Rolex watch. I might even be able to buy a diamond pinky ring.

I do not believe in the power of positive thinking. I believe in the power of realism and transparency. The inspirational stories and bullet points in *Writers Digest* are not going to help you build a platform by itself. Real platform arises from your work

in the real world. And if that work is likely to be of interest to a wide audience, then it will also be of interest to a book publisher or literary agent.

Now before you decide to give up writing and direct your future toward sacking groceries at Safeway, you need to know that platform is not an absolute impediment to getting your book published. But not having one is a significant hurdle that must be overcome.

Platform is not especially important if you are writing debut literary fiction. Most agents will make the decision to represent you based on the quaint notion that your book is great writing. Still, platform plays a part. As an agent, when I'm going through the queries for fiction manuscripts, I will pay more attention to authors who have previously been published in prestigious literary magazines or have won literary awards. Being a Stegner fellow doesn't hurt either. Having an agent is a kind of platform, I guess. At least the literary editor will consider your manuscript. Maybe read the first 5 or 10 pages. But still most agented manuscripts for debut novels never get a book contract.

Having a previously published novel is a great platform, but only if the novel sold well. If your last novel bombed, it is worse than having no track record at all. I have heard some agents have submitted second novels under a nom de plume in order to overcome this challenge. (Confession. I did it once for one of my clients.)

Often I speak to writers who are composing memoirs, about overcoming a personal or family crisis. These stories are inherently dramatic but hard to get published. You do see memoirs by unknown writers showing up in a publisher's catalogue. Sometimes the memoir is tied to a big news story. Stories by parents of victims from the latest and most horrific school shooting, for instance. Otherwise the memoir is going to have to be a literary tour de force. Something like *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Wells comes to mind. Then, of course, there is *Eat, Pray, Love*. It is neither a celebrity book, a news story, nor is it a literary masterpiece. Oh well. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

I have gotten contracts for books by authors without platform. Yes. Memoirs, even. Todd Farley, the author of *Making the Grades: My Misadventures in the Standardized Testing Industry* published by Berrett-Kohler, had no platform. I pulled his query out of the slush pile. He had written the book while living in his brother's under-heated attic in Maine. He told an amazing story with sidesplitting humor about his hapless career grading standardized tests. The week of publication, Todd wrote the guest op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, a spot usually reserved for people with platform.

I agented Peter Rudiak-Gould's memoir, *Surviving Paradise: One Year in a Disappearing Island*, published by Union Square Press. It was another unsolicited query. Peter was a 24 year old graduate student at Oxford. His book tells the story of

the year he spent teaching on a small atoll in the Marshall Islands. His writing, his style was stunning. The book was acquired simply because of its inherent quality. Certainly not because of his platform.

Whenever I participate in agent panels, aspiring authors ask us what are our tips for effective pitches or query letters. I usually say the best way to develop a pitch is to have a good project to pitch. Similarly, and not to be too Zen about this, the best way to develop a platform is to have a good platform to develop.

## How to Write a Great Marketing Plan For Your Book Proposal

Most writers are intimidated by book proposals. I can see why. Writers are writers, not salesmen, not marketers, not researchers, and not necessarily aggressive self-promoters. But all of these qualities are necessary when you're putting together your proposal.

I don't think proposals are hard to do, that is unless you don't have a clear idea of what your book is about. And even then, I've found that in the process of writing the proposal, the writer's ideas become clarified, the structure of the book tightened up, weaknesses become apparent, and more often than not the concept of the book gets strengthened. Writing the proposal is time well spent. And a good agent will lead you through this process.

Simply put, a book proposal is a business plan. The purpose of the proposal is to describe your book idea to a publisher and to get them excited about it. But you also need to be careful not to oversell. Publishers are going to give you a lot of money (well, probably only an insultingly small amount of money) based on the material in the proposal, and they have a right to know what they are buying. Trying to dazzle them with hype or baffle them with bullshit isn't going to work. We have heard the pitches a million times about the book being a shoe-in for Oprah, being the newest *Eat Pray Love*, or the next Spielberg blockbuster. Certainly all of those things would be nice, but they usually don't happen. Trying to oversell the book sends the message that the writer is either unrealistic or manipulative. These are messages you don't want to convey in the proposal.

Of course, the \$64,000 question is going to be whether your book will make money. And one of the questions you will need to answer is "what will the writer do to help sell the book?" That question must be addressed in the "marketing" section of the book proposal. This is usually the part of the proposal authors have the most difficulty with.

Remember the marketing section is about what you are going to do. You don't have to advise the publisher about what they already know. You don't have to make a list of major national periodicals to send review copies to. But if you are aware of niches that the publisher wouldn't know about, you should point it out.

And you should be quite emphatic about what you will do to promote the book. And that means don't fill up the proposal with errant speculation and wishful thinking. I generally tell my clients not to use the word "might" in their marketing section. It's



weak and sends the message you also “might not” do what you are proposing. And while you are at it, don’t use the word “try” either (as in “I will try to get Cameron Diaz to give me a blurb.”)

A good marketing plan needs to be robust, but it also needs to be convincing. You have to speak with authority. This means you need to have a realistic and professional tone. And you also have to be honest. Don’t promise what you can’t deliver.

Here are some points you should be thinking about when writing your plan.

**1. Websites.** Publishers expect you to have a website for your book. So you should mention that you intend to do it. Now if you already have a website with an impressive number of unique visitors, then you have a compelling pitch and you should make it.

**2. Blogs and social media.** Publishers like authors to blog. If you have one, that’s great. And if you have impressive numbers of followers and viewers, let the publisher know. But many of you aren’t going to do blogs. Maybe you don’t have that kind of time. So don’t promise one unless you are committed to it. Publishers also expect you to engage in social media like Face-book and maybe Twitter, so you should address that. And if you have an impressive amount of friends and followers in social media, then let the publisher know that too.

**3. Media appearances.** If you have strong connections with media and have a realistic chance of getting bookings, then mention it in the proposal. It helps if you have had previous appearances in those venues or if you have a close relationships with people who can help you line them up. But again, don’t engage in wishful thinking.

**4. Blurbs.** They are good as long as you either already have the blurbs or have firm commitments. It’s ok to say Cameron Diaz will blurb your book if she has agreed to do it. But don’t include a list of celebrities you will “approach” for blurbs. That’s weak.

**5. Speaking engagements.** If you do public speaking as part of your job or your platform, then talk about the venues where you will be speaking at the time of publication. You should limit this to major venues with significant audiences.

**6. Book signings.** It’s ok to say you will aggressively seek out book signings. Remember publishers usually make the initial contact with the bookstores.

**7. Book tours.** Publishers won’t send you on a book tour unless you are a huge author. Some authors will go on a tour at their own expense. If you intend to do this, mention it in the proposal. Give the publisher a list of cities and tell them you will work with the publisher to line up signings and media appearances in those cities.

**8. Book groups.** Offer to meet with book groups reading your book or do Skype appearances. It's always a little tricky trying to ferret out these groups. If you have ways of doing it, let the publisher know.

**9. Press kits.** It's always nice to put this in the marketing plan, because it shows you are savvy at promotion. Describe the press kit a little. And if you have creative ways to disseminate it, let the publisher know. Again remember not to tell the publisher how to do their job.

**10. Other stuff.** You should try to think of other creative ways to promote the book that won't be done by the publisher. Do blog tours, giveaways, op-ed pieces. Hire your own publicist, but let the publisher know this and make sure that you will be working closely with the publisher on promotion.

These are just a few ideas. You need to think long and hard about this. Remember whatever you say in this section, the most important thing is to be realistic and convincing. And that means --in this and in all things--be honest.

## My Stern Lecture to Writers

Sometimes I can't sell a book to a publisher. Actually, a lot of times I can't. Even after doing this job for 5 years and getting an estimated 5000 rejection letters explaining why the editor turned me down; even after my rigid filtering process where I reject at least 500 unsolicited author queries for every one that I decide to represent; even when I have become so smitten with a project that I am convinced the publisher will offer a seven figure advance and Spielberg will be on the phone next day begging me to make a movie deal; I still have projects I can't sell. All agents do. Even the coveted celebrity New York agents who have daily lunches with the coveted celebrity executive editors. Whenever any agent is representing an unknown author, taking a risk, trying to sell a book based on the merits of the project, not just on the author's celebrity status, there will be rejections.

And when I do sell a book, sometimes for a lot of money, it is usually after I have received 30 rejections from other editors saying: "it's a really great book, but I just didn't fall in love with it", or "it's competing with another one of our titles", or "the author has too modest a platform".

And authors can be even less realistic than I am. After all, they look at the bookstore shelves and see a lot of dreck. They read lots of literary novels that are all well crafted but have a feeling of being sort of the same. They see some really horrible exploitative celebrity memoirs. Really crappy social analysis by gas bag political pundits. And some of these book deals really are getting seven figure advances.

So now what I do just before I submit the project to the publisher is give my client this stern lecture:

"Today I am sending out your book. I believe in it. Otherwise I wouldn't have worked with you for 4 months polishing the proposal, refining the concept, and (in my humble opinion) making it perfect.

"But you must be realistic. It's hard to get books published these days. You should hope for the best but expect the worst. I have experience in these matters and will make sure that your book gets to the right editor at the right imprint. I don't just send books to the same 10 editors and then give up on it. I will send it to all major and not so major publishers who would have an interest in your book. If I can't sell this book, you can be assured that all avenues have been explored.

"If I can't find a publisher, it doesn't mean that your book isn't good. Sometimes, most times, the decision to publish a book comes down to issues of marketing, not quality or aesthetics.

"But even though your book is good, there are also a lot of other good projects going around. Editors may look at 10 proposals a week or 300 fiction manuscripts a year. Most

of them have been heavily vetted by agents. And most of them are publishable. In other words, there is lots of competition.

“You have asked me several times how much your advance will be. I won’t venture a guess on that because my estimates have been wrong so often. Sometimes I expect \$20,000 and get an advance for \$100,000. Sometimes I get an advance for \$7,000, even from the big publishers. Times are tough for publishers just like for the rest of us. The big ones are owned by multimedia conglomerates who are putting a lot of pressure on the publishers to make a lot of money. So publishers have become skittish about big advances. As an agent, I probably can get a publisher to sweeten the deal a little. But publishers base advances on their calculation of sales. They always have a figure in their head of the maximum they will pay. My job is to find out what that figure is and try to find other ways of sweetening the deal when they won’t budge on the advance. I’m an agent, and I don’t have secret alchemical wisdom. I can’t turn lead into gold.

“Don’t expect your publisher to spend a lot of time and energy promoting your book. All those full page ads in *The New York Times* usually are focused on a very few name brand authors. The publisher really expects you to do the heavy lifting and to promote your own book. They used to send a lot of authors around on 7 city tours. They don’t any more. I have never met an author, no matter how successful, who was satisfied that their publisher promoted their book well. You might ask yourself what kind of added value you get from having a commercial publisher as opposed to self-publishing. It’s a reasonable question to ask. But the answer is complicated.

“I know you would give a great interview on *Oprah*, *Fresh Air*, or *The Daily Show*. And a lot of publishers will make contacts to these and other “A” list venues. But competition for this is fierce and these shows have their own criteria that is often hard to fathom. Again, hope for the best but expect the worst.

“And then there is the Big Enchilada, the Holy Grail. I mean the call from Spielberg. Even though your novel would make a great movie or a tv series, it might not happen. There are a lot of “option” deals for books. Most of them are for very little money, and most of them never go beyond the option. Just like Oprah, movie producers have their own calculations that are not easy to comprehend. Does the book have the kind of 3 act structure that producers want. Will the character in your novel fit with a star who could attract financing? Would the subject of the book require so much resources for production that the film couldn’t make money? Has the producer gone into drug rehab and become unavailable for an indeterminate amount of time? Hope for the best, expect the worst.

“So now I’m sending out the book. Let’s cross our fingers and hope for that seven figure deal. But....remember my #1 rule: be realistic.”

# Publisher Rejection Letters From Plato to Hitler

Andy Ross

From: Ask the Agent Blog: [www.andyrossagency.wordpress.com](http://www.andyrossagency.wordpress.com)

When I became a literary agent three years ago, I simply wasn't ready for the flood of publisher rejection letters flowing into my office in response to my submissions. It felt a little like my social life in high school. I can only imagine the shame and humiliation that my clients must experience from these letters. Four years of work on a novel reduced to a single line, a formula really: "I just didn't fall in love with it." Or: "We all felt it didn't quite have the right narrative arc." I decided to engage in a mental exercise of employing the standard rejection templates as they might have been used for some of the great (or notorious) classics of Western Civilization.



***Plato's Republic***

Andy,

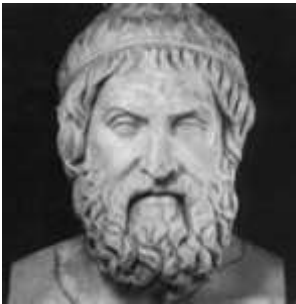
Thank you so much for submitting *The Republic* by Plato. Certainly this book has much to recommend it. It asks some serious questions and it doesn't get bogged down in "jargon" like some of the philosophy books we see coming over the transom. That said, I am going to have to pass on this book. I'm not sure that the author has anything really new to say about the themes he discusses. The Good, the True, the Beautiful, and the Just have been written about *ad nauseum* since the time of the ancient Greeks. There is really no new way to slice and dice this material. And although Mr. Plato seems quite adept at dialogue, I can't help but wonder how he would hold up in the face of tough questioning by the likes of Bill O'Reilly.



***The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann**

Andy,

I don't quite know what to make of this book. Six hundred pages of narrative about people in a tuberculosis sanitarium on top of a mountain, and for twenty years? Really! I'm afraid that modern American readers need a little more action and excitement in their lives. They don't want to come home after a hard day at the office and read about the over-ripe decadence of Central European culture in the early Twentieth Century. I certainly don't mean to sound snarky, but in my humble opinion (and I have been known to be wrong before), Herr Mann is nothing but a gas bag.



***Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles**

Andy,

Thank you for your submission of Mr. Sophocles' drama, *Oedipus Rex*. Sophocles is an exceptional dramatist with many fine works to his credit that have been both critical and commercial successes. And we feel privileged that you gave us the chance to consider this work. That said, I'm afraid we are not going to publish this book. Although I am a personal admirer of Mr. Sophocles, I feel that *Oedipus* is a minor work and, quite frankly, a little derivative. The implicit theme, the idea that "from suffering comes wisdom," has become a little hackneyed and a little frayed at the edges, as it were. I think that after seeing James Cameron's *Avatar*, there really isn't much left to say on this subject. But we would be delighted to look at anything newer and fresher that Mr. Sophocles might create in the future.



***Ulysses* by James Joyce**

Andy,

I'm sorry. I just don't get it.

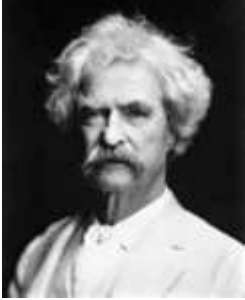


***Macbeth* by William Shakespeare**

Andy,

Thank you for sending us *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. Mr. Shakespeare certainly brings a fresh voice to the modern theatre and has a commendable mastery of plot and character. That said, I am not going to make an offer on this book. I think that Mr. Shakespeare has a certain inelegance of style and his language skills could use some refining. I also noticed a number of careless misspellings in this work. The extensive "scholarly" footnoting with its endless references to "folios" and "quartos" was annoying and distracting.

I feel compelled to say, and I hope neither you nor your client take offense at this, that some of his "speeches" are just plain pretentious and not suited to the more casual sensibilities of our upscale readers. For instance: Macbeth says: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Don't you think this could be stated more clearly and succinctly? How about: "Life is pretty confusing. Sometimes I just want to shake my head and cry." Furthermore, I could not help but note an obvious unattributed locution from William Faulkner. Your author should try to be more careful.



***Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain**

I am a big fan of Mr. Twain's work. In fact, his novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, was one of the best books I read last season. So I approached your submission with considerable excitement. I'm sorry to say that I was not thrilled with *Tom Sawyer*. Compared to Mr. Twain's other works, I felt that this was merely a bagatelle and perhaps a little (shall we say) *jejune*. Still I sent it around for some more reads and I took it to the editorial meeting. The sales director pointed out that all of Twain's novels since *Huckleberry Finn* have shown steadily declining Bookscan numbers. He felt, and the committee agreed, that it was unlikely that the chains would take a position on this book. But I encourage you to show us any new projects the author might develop in the future.



***War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy**

Andy,

Thank you for your submission of Count Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. I found it to be a very well researched and polished novel. And I can certainly see how it would appeal to the same readers who enjoy the works of Herman Wouk. But I am afraid that I won't be making an offer. As you know, our imprint is always looking for quality genre fiction. And certainly *War and Peace* falls squarely within the conventions of the historical novel. But just between you and me, this manuscript isn't quite ready for prime time. For starters, it is a real door-stopper. 1500 pages plus change! I think the author needs to face the facts that he could do with some judicious freelance editing. Our readers' lead busy lives and are looking for a more, shall I say, intimate reading experience. If the author could cut the plot by, say, 900 pages; if, for example, he could take out the sub-plot of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia, we would be happy to review this submission again.





***Mein Kampf* by Adolph Hitler**

Andy,

I have to tell you that this one came pretty close. Personally, I loved this book. I took it to the editorial board. We almost had consensus. But the committee reluctantly decided to pass. There is much to admire in this book. We were impressed by the author's passion, his strong sense of purpose, and his robust voice. Some of us were moved to tears by the Youtube clips from the Nürnberg *Parteitag* rallies. Herr Hitler's platform is most impressive, indeed. One of the editors said, only half jokingly, that it was too bad we couldn't bottle Herr Hitler's charisma and give it to some of our more pedestrian authors. And our marketing director was inspired by the book proposal that offered so many innovative marketing strategies. The concept of summarily executing any citizen of the Third Reich who didn't purchase this book was refreshing and indicates that your client is a very savvy marketer.

At the end of the day though, there was no agreement on how we could position this book in the marketplace. Some of us wanted to treat it as a kind of how-to book for people who were seeking to improve their public speaking and, at the same time, pick up some useful tips for world conquest. Others felt that the ideas were just a little too "weighty" for a trade house like ours. After some brain storming about possible merchandise spin-offs, we decided that we were the wrong home for this remarkable book.

We wish Herr Hitler the best of luck in his career as a writer and as a public figure and expect to see great things from him in the future.

Andy Ross© 2010

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## Sample Non-Fiction Query Letter

I am offering for your consideration *God and His Demons*, a deeply informed critique of the hypocrisies of organized religion and how it has betrayed its original values. I have taken a multi-disciplinary approach to his subject that examines religion historically, exegetically, politically and economically. The style of the book is lively and often humorous or ironic.

*God and His Demons* promises to be controversial. It leaves no stone unturned, even taking on such sacred cows as: Mother Teresa, the Pope, and the Dalai Lama.

I am a progressive scholar, an author of 20 books that have been translated and published in over 25 languages. I give 30 lectures a year in venues as far afield at Brussels, Havana, Paris and London to audiences in excess of 1000 people. I have won awards from Project Censored, the Caucus for a New Political Science, the city of Santa Cruz, New Jersey Peace Action, the Social Science Research Council, and the Society for Religion in Higher Education. For several years I was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C.

The final manuscript will be approximately 75,000 words. I have attached [will send on request] a book proposal.

Author

## Sample Query Letter for Fiction

I am submitting to you *War and Peace*, a 350,000 word novel of literary historical fiction.

The novel is the epic story, written in a realistic style, of Napoleon's invasion of Russia and how 3 characters, members of the Russian nobility, live their lives or die in the course of the novel. In addition to dramatic and interrelated stories of Pierre Bezukhov, Natasha Rostova, Prince Andrei Bolkosky, I also bring in some themes that try to explain how the events in the narrative help us understand the inexorable truths of history. Some of the memorable secondary characters are real historical figures, notably Napoleon and the Russian general, Kutuzov. I think my description of the Battle of Borodino is memorable. I tried to make the battlefield come to life so that the reader can almost smell the gun powder.

The book has received enthusiastic praise from some of the great novelists of western literature. Thomas Mann said of *War and Peace* that it was "the greatest ever war novel in the history of literature." John Galsworthy has called *War and Peace* "the best novel that had ever been written."

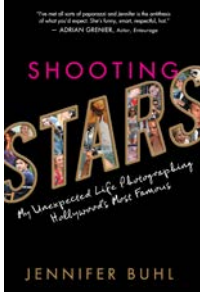
I am a published novelist, author of the best selling novel, *Anna Karenina* that has been translated into xx languages and adapted for film multiple times, most recently in 2012 from a screenplay by Tom Stoppard starring Keira Knightly and Jude Law. I have also written works of short stories, philosophy and social criticism.

The manuscript is complete and available at your request.

Count Leo Tolstoy

Query from Jennifer Buhl, author of SHOOTING STARS: MY UNEXPECTED LIFE PHOTOGRAPHING HOLLYWOOD'S MOST FAMOUS. (Sourcebooks, 2014)

Attn: Mr. Ross:



I am seeking representation for *Snap: Memoir of a Paparazza*, a tell-all book about today's hottest celebrities from the inside eyes of one of Hollywood's few female paparazzi.

Chock-full of celebrity anecdotes, *Snap* provides an authoritative look into a world everyone's heard about, but few will ever experience. All of the tabloid favorites are here: Brit, Linds, Cam, Jen, Becks, Zac. Fans can read about how "paps" get *the shot* and the tricks some celebs use to keep us from getting it.

As a woman in a profession dominated by men and marked by ugliness, I struggled to gain acceptance while dealing with embarrassment, harassment, ridicule... and a rapidly ticking biological clock. Yes, woven among the true stories of my encounters with the world's most famous is my own story, the story of a woman in her mid-thirties looking for love, babies... and adrenaline.

The completed 115,000-word memoir spans my work as an L.A. paparazza from 2006 to 2009. Previous to that I worked as a CNN guest producer ("booker"). I have been a guest on CNN's *Larry King Live* and *Nancy Grace*, and on NPR, as well as other media outlets. My photographs have appeared copiously in publications and TV shows around the world, including TMZ, *People* magazine, Britain's *Daily Mail*, and *Entertainment Tonight*. As a freelance photographer, I own the copyright to, and the right to reprint, all of my photos.

The first two chapters are pasted below and the full book will be available for review in early December. Thank you for your consideration.

(Material excerpted from Andy's Ebook: *Ask the Agent* available from Book Passage, Amazon.com, iBooks, and more. )