

The Unspoken Rules of How The World of Agents and Publishing Works, and how you can improve your chances of success in it. by Carol Roper

If you are seeking an agent to represent your work, I am assuming the manuscript is professionally typed and corrected. An agent or editor expects that the work you submit is ready to go to market. If your work is NOT completed, or is in anyway, less than professional do not waste your time. Remember the old adage: You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

Caution! Anyone can become a literary agent, including you or me. Approximately 3000 agents are listed in various directories. There are no training, nor licencing requirements to become an agent.

Opinion is divided as to whether the new writer needs an agent, or should query publishers directly. In my experience, and that of many writers, it is as much work to find a first agent as it is to find a publisher. Six companies own the majority of publishing imprints in the United States. Random House, for instance, owns more than 100 imprints, including Viking, Puffin, Doubleday, Golden Books and Del Rey. The hitch is that large publishers won't read unsolicited material. This has created a subculture of "agents" who are not really agents. These people have limited, or no contacts with the publishing field and no track record. In other words they can do nothing for you that you can't do for yourself, such as write query letters. Stick with agents and publishers you find listed in reputable directories.

Research what category of book you have written. The publishing mergers narrowed the market for certain kinds of genre books at large houses, but opened new markets at smaller publishing companies. Be aware that most publishing houses are owned by film studios which are, themselves often just one part of a large conglomerate. Paramount pictures for example owns Simon and Schuster.

Avoid agents who charge commissions higher than the norm, or who charge reading fees, evaluation, marketing or editing fees; they are not legitimate agents. Real agents do NOT charge fees other then the commission received from sales. If you send your work to an agent who charges a reader's fee, or suggests he or she can represent your book, but first you must pay him or her to edit it, or pay someone they recommend to edit it, or the "agent" proposes you hire them to package and market your unpublished book. This is NOT what a real agent does.

The agent's job is to market your literary, nonfiction or dramatic work to the appropriate editor. Reputable agents do not offer financial or personal advice. They are agents, not accountants, or your new best friend. Some agents, if interested in representing your work, will offer editorial suggestions. They do NOT charge for this advice. If you agree that re-writing your book at someone else's suggestion will improve it and make it more saleable, and this is a reputable agent with a sales record, consider making the suggested changes.

Agents earn their living from sales commissions. An agent's commission is generally 15%. It may be 5% to 10% higher for foreign sales rights. If you have this occur, congratulations. Your book is selling well, and the rights are in demand.

At the end of this article are two websites where you can verify if the agent you are interested in has had any complaints made against them.

Don't send fiction to an agent who handles nonfiction, or vice versa. Look for agents who handle the kind of material you write. If you have a book-length work of fiction or creative nonfiction that you want to sell to a commercial publisher, an agent is probably essential as editors, who used to read and find books themselves, rely on agents to do it for them. Agents with sales track records are more difficult to attract because they already have a roster of clients, but it is not impossible. Agents market where they have contacts. Choose an agent with a track record in the area you are interested in. Agents look for manuscripts that are polished and marketable and that match their interests. Translated this means they are looking for what their contacts, the editors, say they are looking to buy. Except for a famous few, most editors are trapped in a kind of power sandwich between and the hapless, entry level drone, usually a recent college graduate, (who, by the way, is the first person who reads your work) and the remote well-compensated executives at the top whom editors aim to please, or lose their jobs. This has made what was once a personal business run by literate and intelligent people who genuinely loved books, and the writers who write them, into an impersonal one. Sort of like a visit to the doctor.

To find a legitimate agent look in the books you have read that in some way resemble yours, but not literally, and find out who the published author's agent is, or go to the library and start your research, or on-line. Check out Jeff Herman's "Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents," or "The Practical Writer," or "Writer's Digest Guide to Literary Agents" all of which publish information about what kind of material the agent is looking for, and if the agent accepts unsolicited material. These books can be bought at your local bookstore, or ordered on-line. You can also go to the Association of Authors Representatives for names and addresses. (<http://www.aar-online.org>)

Never phone an agency unless you have a valid recommendation from someone the agent knows and likes. Even then, be prepared to be dealt with as if you are a phone solicitor, because you are. Agents prefer query letters. Unless you are ready to be traumatized, never call an agent to whom you have submitted work to find out if they have read it, and/or want to represent you?

When writing a query letter, BE POLITE. You are writing a business letter. Be professional. State why you are contacting this agent/editor. Give a two to four-sentence synopsis of your book. Leave out plot details. Mention what other credits you may have; if you have none, mention whatever background is pertinent to what you have written, briefly. The query letter should be NO LONGER than one single-spaced page in 12 font. Include the book's word length. Close by saying you would like to send the complete manuscript. Always include a self-addressed stamped envelope for the agent's reply. Some writers send the first five pages of the book. This is a judgement call.

A few don'ts for query letters: Don't try to be funny, or "cute," in your letter. Don't include your photo. Don't mention how many other agents have seen your work and turned you down. If you've had an agent, don't "diss" this previous agent.

Signing a contract: Agents charge from 10-15% for their services. There are NO OTHER CHARGES to the writer. A contract will usually be for a period of one year. All contracts are negotiable. Ask what the agent's marketing plan is? Ask if you will be sent copies of responses the agent receives from publishing houses? This is standard.

Now that you have an agent, the job of selling your book has just started and even a good agent may not be able to sell it, so keep writing. Books have a long shelf life. What doesn't sell this year may sell a few years from now.

Checking out small or new agents:

Writer Beware Website was created and is maintained by Victoria Strauss. It alerts writers to fraudulent agents and publishing houses. <http://www.sfwaweb.org/beware/index.html>

There is also <http://www.agentresearch.com> who will do an agent verification for free to review if any complaints have been lodged against the agent.

If you are unable to find an agent do not become discouraged. Many fine writers without agents are selling their work, and are published with good results. Keep writing.

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Contact Carol, if you would like her to give a writer's workshop, or speak at your writer's group, or writer's conference.