

BY BRIAN KELIHER

Are You the Next Grisham?



You're a terrific writer—so say your mother and your ninth-grade composition teacher.

You churn out briefs that mesmerize even the most mulish judge.

So what separates you from John Grisham...

besides a thriving literary career and royalties of well over \$100 million?

Well, for one thing, your enthralling manuscript is still in your top desk drawer, unpublished.

Dust off that old tome and get into the game. What follows is a primer for getting published.

The Publisher

The publisher picks up the tab for editing, printing, marketing, and distributing your book and, if you're lucky, they'll toss in a hefty advance to cover your writing expenses and the cost of a small château in the South of France.

Penguin, Doubleday, and Basic Books are publishers familiar to most, but few know that more than 2,000 publishers do business in the United States. Each is your potential partner.

Which publisher is best for your masterpiece? Focus on houses publishing your type of book. Literary fiction works for Harcourt here in San Diego, but not Nolo Press in Berkeley. And within houses each editor prefers a certain genre. Cecile Goyette with Dial will love your children's book, but your nonfiction cutting-edge work in social thought is better with Fred Hills at The Free Press. Know your market!

How do you maneuver through this labyrinth? Browse the shelves at Borders for publishers of books similar to yours. Pick up *Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers and Literary Agents* (Prima Publishing), or *Writer's Market* (Writersmarket.com). Each lists a publisher's forte. For more information check out the online newsletter Publisherslunch.com. It's free and quite good.

Or you can get a Literary Agent.

The Agent

Many publishers won't consider your work unless submitted by a Literary Agent so writers often start with the agent search.

A good agent knows editors and publishers best suited for you. And for a mere 15 percent of everything you earn, your agent will critique your work, submit it to publishers, negotiate the deal, and take your Shih Tzu to the Pet Palace for a shampoo.

Unfortunately, finding a willing agent to represent you can be a herculean task because of your lack of a publishing track record and their disdain for things soft and cuddly.

But formidable challenges never stopped you before, right?

Literary Market Place (Literarymarketplace.com) and *Writer's Market* each list contact information for more than 400 agents. For a more intimate look at your potential representative, *Writer's Guide* profiles 200 agents and answers probing questions like "Describe your client from Hell" and "Do you watch the Sopranos?"

Once you've narrowed the list to your favorite 75 or so, it's time to make contact.

The Query Letter

How does one make contact with an agent? Phone calls sometimes work, but most often you'll be considered a pest. Your

best bet is a query letter. This letter is a sales pitch. One page, usually. Be concise.

Your lead must hook the reader. Read feature articles in magazines and newspapers to see how it's done. Use an anecdote, a question, or a startling fact. Get their attention.

The next paragraph or two explains why the publisher should be interested. Include marketing ideas—if truly remarkable. Include relevant information about you. Your Spelling Bee award in the second grade isn't relevant to your Civil War book. Your position as treasurer of the American Civil War Society is.

Writer's Guide and online sites including *Authorlink.com* and *Writers.net* have more tips on writing a query.

The Proposal

Selling nonfiction requires a Book Proposal. In fact, you can sell a nonfiction book without a completed manuscript, using only a Proposal. Selling your novel, however, usu-

ally requires a synopsis and, for the unpublished writer, a complete manuscript.

How to Write a Book Proposal by Michael Larsen and *Write the Perfect Book Proposal* by Jeff Herman give more details. Here's a breakdown:

Overview: What makes your book special? What's it about?

Biography: Sell yourself. Relevant information only.

Marketing: Who will buy it? Demographics.

Competition: What else is out there and why is yours better.

Chapter Outline: Chapter titles followed by abstracts.

Sample Chapters: Optional. One or two will do.

Most proposals are between 12 and 30 pages. It can be as short as one page. For example, if Saddam Hussein wants to publish *The Dummies Guide to Hiding Weapons of Mass Destruction*, two lines would suffice. For the rest of us, more is better.

The Rules

Many variations of this process exist. Each published writer will have a slightly different take. And self-publishing has worked well for many. *The One-Minute Manager*, *The Elements of Style*, and *The Celestine Prophecy* are just a few books self-published before successful releases by large publishers. Rules are made to be broken.

"The profession of book-writing makes horse racing seem like a solid stable business," wrote John Steinbeck. True, publishing offers challenges few other professionals must endure. But Steinbeck never practiced law, did he? ♦

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