

FAQ Preparing your work for submission to agents and publishers

Beth Miller

Please note, the following applies to fiction submissions only. Non-fiction submissions have very different requirements. There are excellent guidelines on writing non-fiction proposals in the Writers' & Artists' Yearbook, or online at www.writersandartists.co.uk.

1. Before you send your work out

- Don't submit your work until the novel is finished and edited. If an agent or publisher likes the first three chapters they'll want to see the rest, straight away. They won't want to wait for six months or a year while you write it.
- Before you submit, you might want to do a version of the following:
 - Write a first draft (most novels are in the region of 80,000 – 100,000 words).
 - Put it aside for a month. This should give you the distance you'll need to be a good editor of your own work. You might as well start writing something else in this time. Agents and publishers like to know that there's something else in the pipeline.
 - Go through your draft rewriting, editing, making notes, improving until you have a good second draft. This will take a while.
 - Find two or three good readers who'll give their opinion on your second draft. A good reader is not necessarily a writer; they are someone who gives you honest, tactful feedback. Someone who tells you what works as well as what doesn't. Someone whose only motivation is to help you improve your book. Compensate them with baby-sitting/wine/a meal/reading their work. You *can* pay professional readers but these are expensive and may not be necessary at this – or any other – stage.
 - Take your readers' feedback on board. This is not the same as following it slavishly – you have to trust your own instincts. Use their suggestions to produce a third draft.
 - Put the third draft aside for a month. Meanwhile, write your synopsis.
 - Re-read and re-write – now you have your fourth draft. This one might be polished enough to send out, or you might need a few more passes at it.
 - Now you need to write a query letter.

2. Writing a query letter

It's worth spending a fair amount of time on writing the letter, because it's the first thing of yours an agent will read. Your goal is to make the letter interesting enough that it's not the *only* thing of yours they read.

- Most agents and publishers want email submissions these days (only a few ask for paper).
- Don't write the letter as a separate document and attach it to an email: the letter *is* the actual email.
- Do attach to it whatever documents the agent/publisher has asked for - usually a synopsis and the first three chapters (but they all ask for something specific).
- Brevity is good – hook them in and get them moving quickly onto your lovely chapters. The letter should be no more than one page, were it on paper rather than an email.
- Make sure you have their name right. 'Dear Ms Brown' or 'Dear Jenny' is fine, depending on your temperament. Do not put 'Dear Agent,' 'Dear Sir/Madam,' and especially not 'Dear Sir.' Many agents and publishers are women, and it looks like you couldn't even be bothered to find their name.
- Next, put a line stating that you are seeking representation (if approaching agents) or publication (if approaching publishers) for your novel called, 'The Most Compelling Title Imaginable' which is complete at 85,000 words.
- Then launch into the pitch (see point 3, below). This is the most important bit.
- After the pitch, you may want to say that your book will appeal to readers of X book. Cite books that have done well and are in a similar genre or theme to yours. 'This book, with its strong female sleuth, will appeal to readers of Sara Paretsky.'
- Now say why you're approaching this particular agent or publisher. Agents want to feel you have approached them specifically, and are not part of a random 100-shot mail-out. Good reasons include that you have read/heard something they said about what they're looking for, which resonates with you and your book; or that you admire one or more writers that they represent (be truthful – BS will be obvious here).
- Finally, introduce yourself briefly. It doesn't matter greatly about previous writing experience, unless you have won awards or published a story. Only state your day job if

it's relevant to the book, eg if you have written about a croupier, and you are one. You don't need to give your age. Some agents love a bit of detail, such as why you write, or how you fit writing into your life, or something unusual about you. Honestly though, one or two lines about you is enough. If the work doesn't speak for itself, then all the Arvon courses in the world won't make any difference.

- That's it. Close the email with the usual sign-offs. Don't forget to include the attachments.
- Don't get emotional. This is a business letter.
- Don't praise your own work.
- Do get a friend to read your letter before submitting. Or use a professional service - such as mine (shameless plug) - that offers feedback on your submission package of letter, synopsis and opening paragraph before you go forth.

<https://www.bethmiller.co.uk/book-coach>

3. The pitch

The pitch (sometimes called 'the hook') is part of the query letter. It's just a few lines giving some details of the plot to pull the reader in. Sounds simple, but it's a hard thing to get right, so take your time. Give a sense of where and when your story's set, what makes your protagonist interesting and novel-worthy, and what great challenge or peril she faces. You don't need to do a plot summary here, nor give the ending – save those for the synopsis. Just offer the exciting bit, like the blurb on the back cover of a book, to whet the reader's appetite.

4. The synopsis

- Every agent and publisher asks for something different in terms of word count. Follow their guidance. If they don't mention it, aim for no more than 500 words.
- Your synopsis should always be written in third-person, present tense, no matter the tense or POV of your novel. But keep it in your own voice.
- You may like to open it with a punchy blurb-like statement of between 35-70 words. (This could be a shortened version of your pitch.) After this opener, move on to the synopsis proper.

- Briefly tell the entire story. Don't go chapter by chapter but give an overview of how the story unfolds and what is interesting about it. Touch on the key scenes, the dramatic turning points, the major themes and show whose story it is. Tell us who the main character is (and say why they're interesting), and outline other characters who are central to the plot.
- Avoid too many names and always refer to your character the same way (e.g. not sometimes 'James' and sometimes 'the doctor').
- Include what is unique about your story.
- Don't be vague. No teasers. Make sure you include the ending.
- Don't include backstory or subplots.
- Edit ruthlessly. Cut adjectives and adverbs that slow it down.
- Read your synopsis to someone who doesn't know your work, and ask them to tell the story back to you. Have they understood it?

5. How many submissions to send out at once

Back in the day it was considered polite to send out to only one agent at a time, and wait for their reply before sending out to someone else. That rule no longer stands. However, everyone has a different take on how many to submit at once. My suggestion is to send out to between three and five agents to start with, and wait till they all come back before going to the next ones on your list. If all five come back as rejections saying the same thing, that might be something you want to address before sending out again.

6. Handling rejection

Being rejected is an inevitable part of trying to get published. If you can think of a rejection note as a badge of honour – you're in the game! - rather than a kick in the teeth, it helps enormously. Most published writers have been rejected dozens, even hundreds, of times. Giving up after one or two rejections means you'll never find out if you could have got published. Having been on the receiving end of a lot of rejections myself, this is a subject close to my heart. Everything I know about handling rejection is in my article here, on the Writers & Artists website: <https://www.writersandartists.co.uk/writers/advice/1204/a-writers-toolkit/essential-information/>