

ASK A
LITERARY AGENT
(Year One)

Noah Lukeman



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Ask a Literary Agent (Year One)
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If you wish, feel free to read and support his other books, including

How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent (www.landliteraryagent.com)

Ask a Literary Agent

(Year One)

By

Noah Lukeman

also by Noah Lukeman

The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile

The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life

A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation

The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II: The Seed of Banquo

How to Write a Great Query Letter

How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent

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Introduction

I started “Ask a Literary Agent” because I thought aspiring authors would appreciate a venue in which they could ask an active literary agent any question they wished, and receive an in-depth response on the topic. Authors often have numerous questions about how to get published and about the (complex) publishing industry, and yet it can be hard to find all of the answers.

I imagined the blog would be slow at first, and yet the outpouring of questions was tremendous, and hasn't stopped since. Clearly there is a need for this (free) service, and I am glad that I can, in some small way, be of help to the writing community.

It has been quite a year running the blog, as I received a tremendous range of questions, ranging from the basic to the sophisticated. With each answer, I endeavored to add even a bit more than what was asked, so as not only to answer the question directly, but also to use it as an opportunity to educate aspiring authors, in depth, on all facets of the industry. I deliberately chose to tackle many tough (and in some cases, controversial) questions, questions which other agents may choose to avoid, and offer answers which you may not find elsewhere.

Now that a year has passed, I thought it would be helpful for authors to have all of the content at their fingertips. While the content in this short book can also be located by your manually scrolling through all of the archives on the blog, I thought it easier for readers to have all of this information conveniently in one place, as a reference, especially in one file. This way, you can save and reference all of the information on your computer and/or read it at your leisure on your e-reading devices. You can also then more easily help other aspiring authors, by simply forwarding this file to them.

I hope the information in these pages is of help to you. If you have any questions, please do feel free to visit the blog and ask away.

Keep writing!

“Should my agent let me know which publishers/editors have read my work, and provide me with copies of the rejection letters?”

“Is any agent, by the rules of the profession, obliged to inform you specifically of where your work has been submitted and give you copies of responses?”

--Anonymous

This is an excellent question, and one which speaks to many issues.

First of all, you must realize that there are no firm and solid “rules” that all agents unanimously adhere to; every agent operates differently. Some agents will provide their authors a detailed rundown of the name of every editor and publisher that he’s submitting their work to, along with copies of rejection letters, while other agents will not provide any such information to an author, at any point.

For those authors who are kept in the dark, it can certainly be quite frustrating. After years of working hard on your manuscript, after finally landing an agent, after knowing your work is being actively submitted, suddenly, you receive nothing but silence. As months pass, this silence can become ever more frustrating. If your agent is not letting you know how many publisher he’s sent it to, which publishers he’s targeted, when he’s sent it out, or how many rejections have come in, you

may naturally wonder how hard the agent is working on your book (or if at all), or if the agent is even doing his job effectively. It can also be frustrating for authors to only hear back from their agent that X number of publishers have passed, without being provided with copies of the rejection letters, or hearing any of the reasons why, or without having any idea of how many publishers still have it, or what the strategy is.

From an agent's perspective, however, providing an author with this information is not always such a simple matter. Some authors, if provided with this information upfront, can try to micromanage the agent, and tell him where to submit (or not to submit). Some authors can monitor the list too carefully, asking for too-frequent updates regarding who has rejected their work. Some authors, if kept in the loop and updated as rejections come in, may become extremely anxious when they hear about the rejections, and thus cause the agent anxiety (which the agent must be free of if he is to stay positive and do his job well). Some authors may, as a result of hearing of the rejections, second guess the agent's submission choices; others may insist on revising their work mid submission based on a particular rejection letter. Some authors may even try to bypass the agent and contact the editor directly, either to try to desperately convince the editor, or to attempt to cut out the agent (this can be of particular concern if the author and agent have a falling out along the way). Other authors can become so upset at being rejected that, if they have a list of who has rejected their work, they may send vindictive letters to the editors (and/or call them), which in turn reflects poorly on the agent. Thus, agents have some cause to be wary in doling out too much information (at least upfront).

That said, this is still no excuse for an agent to keep an author in the dark. While a book is actively on submission, authors have the right to at least know when the agent is initiating the submission, how many publishers he will be submitting to, whether he plans additional rounds of submissions if

the first round fails, approximately when that will take place, what is the ultimate number of publishers he will approach, and how long he estimates the entire submission will take. Authors also have a right to know whether their agent is approaching large or small publishers, and how many of each. Agents can provide all of this without releasing the names of the particular editors upfront, and there is no reason they should not.

Ultimately, if every publisher has passed, then when the submission is over, you absolutely have a right to ask the agent to supply you with the submission list, which should include the names of the publishers and the particular editors. This is crucial for you to have, since it will both allow you to evaluate if your agent did a thorough job, and, if you need to switch agents, it will allow your future agent to evaluate whether there are any stones left unturned that he can submit to. Your agent should also provide you with copies of the rejection letters from editors. It will be especially helpful for a future agent to know if you have any editor fans out there that should be included in your next submission.

In the big picture, this problem can be averted if you spend more time thoroughly researching potential agents upfront. If your research demonstrates that an agent has recently sold many books by high profile authors to major houses, then there is not as much to worry about, even if he's not as in touch with you as you would hope. On the other hand, if research shows that he represents few authors, and has made few sales and to only smaller houses (and a long time ago), then there is more cause for concern. So (as I discuss at length in my books) be very thorough in your research, and choose carefully. If you make the right choice, then issues like submission lists will not be a major cause for concern.

[“I am just starting out and have never been published.](#)

[What should I put in my bio?”](#)

"First of all, thank you so much for all of your posts and your free e-book. I have learned a lot and I greatly appreciate it.

Anyway, I recently read your HOW TO WRITE A GREAT QUERY LETTER and I had one question. You mention that a writer should not mention his smaller accomplishments, because it makes him seem like an amateur. I was wondering then, if a writer is just starting out, has never had anything published, and doesn't have a lot of notable things to put in a bio section of a query letter, then what should he put? What can a beginning writer add into the section that will both attract the agent and not make him doubt the writing abilities of the writer? Basically I am young and I have written one novel (which I have tossed) and I am half way through my second one (which I hope to publish one day). Unfortunately I don't have a lot of writing experience that would make an agent interested in reading my manuscript. I don't feel this takes away from the quality of my work but I understand that it may be harder to get someone to look at it in the first place. So anything that you could tell me would be of great help.

Thanks again for all of your work. It helps immensely!"

--Jake

This is a good question, and one which gets asked frequently.

Aspiring authors who don't have any writing credentials, writing-specific education and/or publication credits (or who only have minor credits), wonder if there exists some magic language that they can add to their query letters to make up for this fact—unfortunately, there is not. No matter how eloquently you phrase your bio, if you do not have the credentials, an agent will know right away; no fancy language will be able to hide this fact, or make up for it.

Thus it's best to just say it like it is, and state that you have no credentials and that this is your first work (this is not necessarily a strike against you, as there always remains the thrill of discovery).

Even better, you can keep the query letter short and not mention anything at all, ending the letter abruptly after your synopsis and concluding sentence. This at least demonstrates self-awareness and word economy.

The alternative (and unfortunately, more common) approach, is for writers to use up several sentences to either list very minor credentials and/or to dance around the fact that they have no credentials, which can end up comprising a good deal of the letter—and, ironically, serves to emphasize a fact you'd prefer to avoid. It also demonstrates lack of word economy, and wastes the agent's time. The only time it might make sense to elaborate on non-writing related experience is you have had unique life-experience which is directly related to the subject matter of your book (for example, if you have written a crime thriller and spent 30 years working for the FBI).

So, again, if you don't have credentials substantial enough to impress an agent, then simply don't say

anything, and allow yourself a shorter query letter.

That said, in the big picture, ultimately the solution is for you to make a sustained effort towards gaining those very credentials which will indeed impress an agent. Just because you've never been published in a major literary magazine, or attended a prestigious writing program, or hold endorsements from famous authors, doesn't mean that you can never attain those things on your own: indeed, many authors who land agents have already managed to attain these things on their own.

This points to a greater issue, which is that many first-time authors approach agents with no credentials whatsoever, expecting agents to build their career from scratch. More seasoned authors understand that a successful publishing career is more often a collaboration between agent and author, with the author already bringing much to the table (and continuing to all throughout his career), with the agent there to take him that final step and land him the book deal. Most agents can't, for example, be expected to devote years to building your resume for you by sending out your short stories to magazines, or applying to writing programs on your behalf, or networking on your behalf for endorsements; there is a certain amount the author must take into his own hands. This proactive, go-getting mentality tends to be present in many successful authors, whereas it tends to be absent in many unsuccessful authors, particularly those who approach agents for the first time (without any credentials).

You can attain major credentials on your own, but first you must prepare for a sustained effort. Instead of a three or six month plan to attain all the credentials you need, why not give yourself a three or six year plan? With that kind of time, you can attend writing programs, workshops,

conferences, colonies; spend extensive time networking and build an endorsement list; get stories published in magazines and online; begin to build a platform; and most importantly, hone your craft extensively. This doesn't mean you need to refrain from approaching agents before you accomplish all of this; on the contrary, as I said, there is nothing wrong with approaching agents with no credentials whatsoever, and you can work to achieve all of this concurrently with your approaching the industry. But you should always be working to this end, regardless. There are many specific, concrete steps you can take to help get you there (which I explain at length in my book [*How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent*](#)), but perhaps the most important step of all is your willingness to devote a sustained, multi-year effort to building your bio on your own.

[“My agent is unwilling to sell world rights to my book.](#)

[What should I do?”](#)

"I think my book's topic resonates with people from other cultures. I know it does--several readers from other countries have contacted me. I used that fact to buttress my request in asking my agent to please try to sell foreign rights. (They never came up initially.) My agent doesn't seem to think it would sell well in other countries and won't try. My publisher says it's not their job. I'm disappointed and aggravated. Your thoughts, please?"

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of “Writers on Writing,” a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California

Whenever an agent negotiates a book deal with a publisher, a few major issues are negotiated immediately (usually, verbally), such as the advance, royalties, delivery schedule and payout, and major subsidiary rights, like translation and UK rights. (Dozens of smaller issues will also be negotiated later, during the contractual process.) Thus before the contract is even issued and the deal signed, your agent will know whether he or the publisher will be controlling the world rights to your book.

Publishers will often want to control world rights, because it is to their advantage to do so. If a publisher sells world rights, they will make a commission off of each sale and more importantly, any foreign income will be lumped into your royalty account and never paid to you unless you first earn back your royalties—thus giving a publisher security should your book not sell in the U.S. But agents will also want to control world rights on your behalf. It is a negotiation. In some cases, publishers will end up controlling them; in others, agents. For example, a publisher might offer a major six or seven figure advance, but insist that such a high advance is predicated on their controlling world rights. In other cases, the advance offer may be low, and the agent may insist that the publisher can only acquire the book for such a low advance if the agent can control world rights. In some cases, three publishers might offer matching or similar advances, but one of them may be willing to give up world rights, and that may be what makes the difference. In some cases, the world rights may be very valuable (for example, with a book about European history), while in other cases, world rights may be unlikely to sell at all (for example, a book about American history), and this will affect the publisher's or agent's fervor in fighting for them.

If an agent ends up controlling world rights, then it is the agent's responsibility to shop them around the world. Most U.S. literary agents engage co-agents based in the major bookbuying countries of the world; once they sell a book for which they have retained world rights, they will contact all of their agents, let them know of the sale, and ask them if they would like to represent the book in their territory. If particular co-agents in particular countries don't feel that the book would be successful in their country, then there is not much the primary agent can do; but the primary agent must at least query these co-agents and try.

In your case, you should ask your agent if he has done this. If he says no, and if he refuses to even query his co-agents, then you should ask him to write you a letter which formally reverts the foreign

rights back to you and which absolves his agency of any commission for foreign sales. (Your publisher is correct in saying that it is not their job if your agent controls the rights.)

Once you have the rights back, there is not much you can do on your own; international co-agents will rarely want to deal directly with authors on individual books, as they prefer to deal with established literary agents with whom they have dozens of deals. But if you ever switch literary agents down the road, then at least you will have the legal right to allow a new agent to shop the foreign rights to this book. Agents will rarely want to represent someone merely for the sake of representing foreign rights for a particular book, but if you write a second book, and a new agent wants to represent that in the U.S., then he might also want to represent the foreign rights to your previous book.

Perhaps most importantly, all of this points to the fact that your current agent is not doing his job if he will not at least ask his co-agents to represent your book overseas. If that is the case, consider switching agents for your next book. Keep in mind, though, that foreign rights are not always easy to sell (it varies greatly, depending on the genre), and it may be that your agent ran it by his co-agents and they rejected it. Don't make assumptions until you've gathered all the facts.

How does one land a job as a literary agent?

"My daughter will be graduating from high school in June and will be pursuing a degree in journalism in the fall. Her goal is to become a literary agent. Although I trust she will receive good advice at the university she plans to attend, she has many questions now about coursework and internships that I can't answer. Can you help me to advise her?"

--Anonymous

Your daughter is very wise to plan so far in advance, and this alone will give her a great advantage. Indeed, one of the best ways to land a job in the publishing industry is to simply allow yourself enough time to do so—in her case, with 4 years of planning, her chances will be very strong.

You should not assume that her university will prepare her: most universities do not, in fact, teach students much practical information about the publishing industry, or prepare them for a job in it. When I attended Brandeis, for example, I was a double major in English and Creative Writing, and yet there wasn't a single course offered about the publishing industry. So unless she is attending a college which specifically boasts a publishing program (like Emerson), then you can assume there will be no instruction or guidance. Some schools will host guest publishing speakers from time to time (Harvard, for example, has a "Writers in the Parlor" series, where I spoke last Fall)—but this is

still not the same as having a full-fledged publishing program.

As far as her coursework, the best thing she can do is to major in English and/or Creative Writing. This is by no means a prerequisite for working in publishing, but it is certainly the most relevant major. Having a legal background (particularly entertainment law) is also good preparation for becoming an agent, since a good portion of what agents do involves deal-making and lengthy contracts.

Much more important, though, will be internships. She must intern in the publishing industry before she graduates (for example, during the summer months). Internships are probably, in fact, the single most important thing one could do to lay the groundwork for a job, since they provide practical (and resume) experience, allow her to see if she really likes the profession, provide knowledge about the industry, and perhaps most importantly, give one personal connections. These contacts (and the resume experience) will be all-important when it comes time for the job search. If two candidates compete for a job, and one has publishing internship experience and the other does not, it is nearly certain that the former will land the position. But she mustn't assume that, because she has a dozen contacts, she will be assured a job upon graduation; publishing is all about timing, and if there are no openings when she graduates, her contacts may be useless. Thus she mustn't become complacent. If she can't find any internships with a literary agency, then she should be open to finding one in a publishing house. And it should be in New York if at all possible.

Although it is still a bit early for her, at some point before graduation she should start reading the industry trades on a weekly basis (publisherweekly.com and publishersmarketplace.com are good places to start). She will absorb much industry information, and she will start to learn the names of

companies and of people in the industry. As a starting point, it will be crucial that she has the names of all the major publishers and imprints memorized—it is a crucial foundation for becoming an agent, and it will be necessary, too, for her to know which publishers to apply to.

Finally, when she graduates and it is time for her to actually search for a job, she should 1) move to New York City (if she doesn't already live here); 2) submit her resume as widely as possible to literary agencies; 3) give herself at least 6 months of searching (the biggest mistake candidates make is giving up after a few weeks or months); 4) not settle for a job which is not to her liking, or work for a boss who is unpleasant; and 5) apply for assistant jobs at book publishers if she cannot find one on the agency side. Working for a major book publisher is also great for the resume, and will help her land an eventual agency job. She should also remain open to the idea of working for the Subsidiary Rights departments of major publishers. This is something that few candidates consider, but which can end up being the most effective technique: it can be a much easier job to land, and literary agencies like to hire employees with Sub Rights experience, because many of the job duties overlap.

In the ideal world, she will land a job at a literary agency as an assistant literary agent, work for an agent who is encouraging and supportive, and within a year or two will be promoted, handling a list of her own authors. Some agents (and agencies) are more supportive of promoting their assistants than others, though; if she finds herself in an environment where assistants are not promoted after several years (or at all), or where her boss is not supportive, she may need to eventually switch agencies in order to become a full-fledged agent.

Should I revise my work for a prospective agent?

"I'm a little confused...my manuscript has been back and forth to my agent now for almost a year and a half with only positive and encouraging verbal feedback, but no written reports. I have now sent the second book after the agent says he wanted to see it, but feedback is still having to be prompted. The agent only reads exclusively, so I just don't know what to do. Is it normal to take this long? Should I expect more feedback? Would it be okay for me to maybe send it to a few other agencies?"

--Louise

You are really asking three questions here: 1) How long should you wait to hear back from an agent about your manuscript? 2) Should you grant an agent exclusive reading time? and 3) If a prospective agent asks you to revise your manuscript (with no guarantee that he will represent you), should you do so?

I already answered the first two questions on this blog. Please see the September 22, 2009 posting titled, "How long should I wait to hear back about my manuscript?" The only point I might add to that is that if you do indeed grant an agent exclusive reading time, then you should not give him more than 3 months exclusive reading time for a finished manuscript, or more than 2 months for a

proposal. In your case, given that it has been over a year, you should certainly not grant this agent any more exclusive reading time. You should start querying other agents simultaneously.

In general, if you are debating revising your manuscript for a prospective agent, keep in mind the following: if an agent asks to see a revision of your work, and his comments are specific for what he'd like to see revised, and you agree with those comments, then go for it. However, don't assume a nice or long rejection letter detailing problems is an invitation to revise and resubmit—only assume so if the agent specifically requests to see another version. In most cases, if an agent rejects a work and does not specifically ask to see a revision, then the agent does not truly want to see it again, even if it is revised. You don't want to fall into the trap of following false leads and revising a manuscript endlessly.

Additionally, if your gut tells you that the agent's comments are wrong, or that he doesn't get your work or share your vision, then don't revise. At the end of the day, you are the one that needs to live with your work.

Can I fire my agent mid-submission?

"My agent did a first round of submissions for my book, all of which resulted in passes. I'm starting to get a bad feeling about my agent. We don't click. Honestly, I don't think he likes me very much, and the feeling is mutual at this point. Is it possible to change agents at this point? The book has only been submitted to about seven or so publishers. There are still many left...."

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of "Writers on Writing," a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California

Legally, you may not have the option to fire your agent--it will depend on the agency agreement you signed (if any). If you did not sign an agreement, then you can legally fire him at any time. If the agreement you signed does not have a clause which specifically states that you have the right to terminate, then you are not allowed to terminate, and that agent has the legal right to represent (or at least be entitled to commission on) your book in perpetuity, whether you like it or not. If the agreement you signed has a clause which states that you have the right to terminate if you follow certain procedures (for example, giving 30 days notice in writing), then if you follow those

procedures, the agreement will be terminated on the effective date, and you will be free to do as you like. Some agents work without agreements, some use agreements with no termination clauses, and others will use different language in their termination clauses, so it can be complex, and is case specific.

Furthermore, terminating mid-submission can be particularly complex. Some agency termination clauses anticipate this scenario and offer language which states that if you terminate mid submission, then the agreement will terminate—BUT if one of the publishers still considering should make an offer at some point in the future, then the agency will be entitled to the commission.

If you don't have a legal basis to terminate, all is not necessarily lost. Practically speaking, many agents are often willing to just terminate an agreement if an author is unhappy with them (and vice versa); some agents, though, will insist on holding an author to the language. Sometimes simply asking nicely will get you released from the agreement, whereas if an author is demanding and threatening, it may backfire, and an agent may insist on his commission. In any case, it will be vital that you obtain a copy of the submission list from the agent (a new agent can't submit without it), so it is best not to alienate him.

The best way to avoid such a legal mess to begin with is to spend more time doing research upfront, and to choose your agent very carefully. As I often say, if there's anything worse than not landing an agent, it's landing an agent who is ineffective, and who keeps you bound to an agreement.

The other issue you must consider is that, just because an agent exhausted a first round of submissions and received seven passes, it doesn't necessarily mean he's doing a bad job. Many books

can take 30 or more rejections until they find a publisher, so one needs patience, and mustn't leap to conclusions. Whether your agent is doing a good job depends not on the number of initial rejections, but rather on 1) which publishers he submitted to; 2) how appropriate they are for your work; 3) which particular editors he submitted to; 4) how he timed the submission; and 5) how much time it took to complete the first round. If, for example, it took him an entire year to submit to just 7 editors, and they are the wrong 7 editors, then he's doing a bad job and you should fire him. But if he's received 7 responses in just 2 weeks, and they are all from excellent editors at excellent houses who read your book carefully, then you don't have cause to fire him. I actually discuss this very issue at length in my book, [How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent](#). In the chapter "How to Keep Your Agent (and When to Let Him Go)," I discuss what it's like to work with an agent on a daily basis, what you should expect from him, and what he should expect from you. Too often, author-agent relationships fall apart simply because of mutual misunderstandings and lack of clear communication. If an author has a better idea of what to actually expect from an agent (and vice versa), then it can be much easier to maintain a happy, working relationship.

Should I query an agent with several books at once?

"Mr. Lukeman: My second book was just published in November. Is it too late for me a find an agent to represent my financial interests going forward on this work? If it is not, do agents typically expect a lower percentage of the revenue since the book is already placed and published? I have a third almost completed. Should I look for someone to represent both? What are your thoughts? Thanks."

--John Bingham

You are asking several questions here, and we'll start by addressing what is one of the more universal questions for aspiring authors: if you have written multiple books, or if you have multiple book concepts, should you query an agent about all of them at once?

As a rule of thumb, when researching and querying agents, it's best to choose one concept and stick to it. This will enable you to be more targeted when researching and approaching agents, and to be more focused in your query letter. It will make you seem less scattered, and will help an agent quickly and easily get his mind around the concept at hand. (Some queries are so scattered that half the agent's battle is trying to figure out exactly what the work is about.) Querying with one concept at a time will also make sure it gets the attention it deserves: when someone pitches ten concepts at once, it can cheapen all of them.

The downside of querying with just one concept is that there is always the remote chance that agents dislike the concept you queried about, but would have been interested in a concept you never mentioned. But then again, if you choose one concept and are rejected, there is nothing to prevent you from querying agents all over again with one of your other concepts.

While this is a basic rule of thumb, as with everything in publishing, the answer can become infinitely more complex, depending on the particular scenario. For example, do you have one fiction and one non-fiction concept? (In which case you should most likely query separate agents for each.) Have you written four novels, and are they all part of a series? (You should query with the first book alone, but mention that it is part of a series.) Are your six concepts all non-fiction, and all in different genres? (Many agents will focus on certain genres, and an agent who represents serious history may not be interested in representing a commercial fitness book.) Have you written one academic work and one for the trade? (Agents will rarely represent purely academic books, and you may need to submit directly to a university press.) Is one of your books heavily illustrated and the other straight text? (The agent who represents a book of straight text may not want to represent a coffee table book.) Etc. etc.

As you can see from these few scenarios, agents' needs differ radically, and it would be fairly unusual to find an agent who is eager to represent one author for a broad array of genres. Additionally, an important part of landing an author a deal, particularly when it comes to non-fiction, is her expertise and credibility in a particular genre—thus it may be easy to land a deal for a work of history from a history professor at Harvard, but impossible to land this same author a cookbook deal. Likewise, the agent who represents literary fiction may not want to represent commercial fiction—and vice versa.

In your particular case, you also asked, “Is it too late for me to find an agent to represent my financial interests going forward on [an already published] work? If it is not, do agents typically expect a lower percentage of the revenue since the book is already placed and published?” The bulk of the agent’s effort takes place before a book is published: the primary role of the agent is to help find a publisher, negotiate a deal and negotiate a contract; they may also help brainstorm a concept, edit a proposal, and work on subsidiary rights. What an agent does not do is get involved in publicity and promotion—that is the job of the publicist. Thus in most cases, there is very little, if anything, for an agent to do once a book is published, and thus it would be unusual for an agent to want to represent an already published book (unless there is sub-rights work to do), and you may not even want this, as you may end up paying him for nothing. The standard industry commission is 15%, and it is unusual for an agent to vary from this, regardless of what stage a book is in.

Once I land an agent, how long does it take to land a book deal?

"How long does it take for publishers to make a decision on a MS? My agent has had my MS to some publishing houses for almost a year."

--Anonymous

It would be convenient to tell you that an agent's submission takes exactly 10 days, or 3 weeks, or 2 months—but this would be simplistic. To give you a thorough response, one must take into account many variables. No two submissions are the same, and no two agents operate the same exact way.

To begin with, the length of time it will take your agent to get a response from publishers will depend on whether you have written fiction or non-fiction, and on whether your proposal (if non-fiction) is, say, 10 pages or 80 pages, or whether your finished manuscript (if fiction) is, say, 200 or 500 pages. Obviously, the shorter the proposal or manuscript, the greater the likelihood of a swift response.

Also affecting response time is your particular agent's methodology. Some agents will submit a work to, say, 40 publishers simultaneously, in one massive round, while others will submit to only a few publishers at a time, in rounds, and wait to hear back before submitting another round. If your agent's methodology is the former, then you may have an answer in a matter of weeks or even days, while if the latter, a submission can drag on for many, many months.

Also affecting response time is how aggressive your agent is in following up with publishers. Some agents send out proposals or manuscripts and don't prod publishers for months; others will get on the phone the next day and ask if they've read it. Another factor is how well-respected your agent is: submissions from some agents will get read right away, while submissions from others might sit on a pile for many weeks. Another factor is your agent's choice of editors: some editors are known for fast responses, while others are known to take their time. Additionally, if an editor likes a work he will often have to share it with colleagues; thus even if he reads quickly, his colleagues may take longer, and this can affect response time.

In general, if I had to make a blanket estimate, I would say that a good agent should be able to hear back from a proposal submission within 8 weeks, and from a manuscript submission within 12 weeks. If your agent submits in rounds, then you will have to tack on that period of waiting time for each additional round.

There are exceptions, but in general, there is no reason why any particular round of submissions should take much longer than this. And even if your agent works in rounds, there is no reason why any given submission should drag on for more than a year. It sounds, in your case, as if your agent is submitting to too few houses, in rounds which are too small, and is waiting too long to hear back.

When you sign with an agent, always request an out clause, which will give you the option of terminating the relationship after, say, six months or one year, if things aren't going the way you'd hoped. This way, if your agent is non-responsive, or taking too long to submit, you can always terminate and go elsewhere. If you terminate, make sure you request that he supply you with the

submission list of where your work has been.

That said, keep in mind that if a year has passed and your book hasn't sold, that is not necessarily a reason to fire your agent. It may be that your agent showed your work to 40 publishers within 12 weeks, and did a good job, but your book just didn't sell. There have been times, for example, when I shopped a book around and it didn't sell, and a year or two later I happened to have lunch with a new editor at a new house, submitted it, and it suddenly sold. If an agent is willing to keep your work on submission like this indefinitely, that is a good thing—as long as he has first thoroughly exhausted his primary rounds of submission. Thus I wouldn't necessarily advise you to fire your agent because your book hasn't sold, but I would advise you to fire him if his methodology is inadequate—if he has never submitted it widely, if he has submitted it to the wrong places, or if he is taking months or years to contact only a few editors.

In any case, at the very least, your agent should not keep you in the dark. He should give you some idea of the strategy, of how many places he's submitting it to, and of when he roughly expects to hear back. And he should give you periodic updates, even if it's only once every few months. If he's unwilling to do this, then find someone else.

What is the ideal page count for a first novel?

"Mr. Lukeman, If I have a debut literary/historical novel that's 110K... is this too long?

What would this wordcount mean to agents and editors and how would it affect my chances of representation/publication?"

Thank you,

Renee Goudeau

It's hard enough to land a book deal—don't make it harder on yourself by writing a book which is shorter or longer than industry standard. That means, for example, don't submit a 100 or a 1,000 page novel (I have had both cross my desk). The average manuscript for a novel comes in anywhere between 250 to 400 manuscript pages. In most cases, it is safe to say a first novel should not be shorter than 200 manuscript pages (approximately 50,000 words), and not longer than 500 manuscript pages (approximately 125,000 words). If so, it will raise a red flag for an agent, and may make him less likely to represent you. There are rare exceptions, of course, and there have been times when I have landed a six figure deal for a novel as short as 150 manuscript pages. But again, this is the exception, not the norm, particularly for a first novel. (Once you are an established author, there is more leniency.)

If this seems too strict, keep in mind that the publishing industry as a whole is far more lenient with

page count than the film industry: a screenplay must come in at 120 pages, and if it is even a few pages off, it is automatically considered “short” or “long”—so much so, that the first thing a Hollywood executive does is flip to the last page. If it comes in at 130 or more, some executives will not even read it. Book publishing is not nearly as strict, but that doesn’t mean you should take advantage of its relative leniency. Do your best to fall within the range of normalcy.

To speak to a bigger issue, artistically, it is rare for a first novel to truly *need* to be over 500 (or less than 200) manuscript pages. 99% of the time, this sort of page count will point to the fact that there is something wrong with the author’s execution. If your first novel is longer than 500 pages, then you may want to ask yourself, for example, whether there are too many characters, settings or subplots. Go through each scene individually and ask yourself whether you can achieve the same goal if that scene were half the length. Conversely, if your page count falls under 200 pages, you may want to consider whether your novel could use a more robust cast of characters, more settings, or more intricate subplots.

“How many agents should I approach?”

On page 24 of your book [*The First Five Pages*](#), which you wrote in the year 2000, you state:

"Instead of feeling you have to query twenty or thirty agents, narrow your list to two or three." Lately, however, in your recent blog posts as well as in your newest book, [*How To Land And Keep A Literary Agent*](#), you seem to advocate a different approach, one of submitting to 50-100 agents simultaneously. Could you share with us the sorts of factors that have inspired you to evolve your thinking in that regard? Thanks in advance.

-Eric Vincent

A good question, and I can see, in retrospect, how this may seem confusing. If there is ever a future edition of *The First Five Pages*, I will be sure to clarify this. Thanks for pointing it out. Let me clarify here:

In general, I advise that aspiring authors approach at least 50 agents when submitting their query letters. If they can find 100 or even 150 agents who are appropriate for their work (and effective), then so much the better. Publishing is enormously subjective, and sometimes you just need to have a large number of people look at a manuscript in order to find someone who gets it.

The reason I emphasize this point is because I have encountered so many authors who have given up after receiving rejections from merely a handful of agents. It is quite possible that in many of

these cases, if these authors had simply queried 50 agents (instead of 10), it would have made their difference in their getting published. As an agent, when I submit a book to publishers, I will often receive dozens of rejections before I sell it. And in many cases, these books go on to become bestsellers. If I had given up after 5 or 10 or 20 rejections, these books may never have been published.

When I wrote that sentence which you quoted from my book, *The First Five Pages*, it was in the context of urging aspiring authors to take greater care when researching and approaching agents. So many queries I had received were addressed “To Whom it May Concern,” and were about topics that I clearly did not represent. It was obvious to me that these authors had not taken much time to research agents, and were merely sending out as many letters as they possibly could. In the book, I wanted to make the point that it is better to mail off queries to a few, select agents who are well researched than it is to merely shotgun it off to 100 agents whom you have not carefully researched. My intention, though, was not to suggest that one should terminate the submission after only a few queries. On the contrary, as I say throughout the book, one should never give up.

“If my agent doesn’t like my next book, should I fire him?”

“If you submit something to your agent and he/she doesn’t like it, do you believe him/her that it’s not up to par, or do you spring free and find another agent who does like it?”

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of “Writers on Writing,” a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California

To be thorough, one cannot give a blanket answer for this question, as each case will vary, depending on a number of factors. This really must be answered on a case by case basis. That said, here are a few general issues to consider:

If your agent has represented you for a number of years, sold many books for you, made you a lot of money, and has always been right in the past, and one day you come to him with a new manuscript and he doesn’t like it, then chances are that he knows what he’s talking about. You should respect his opinion, put it aside and write something new. Having representation with a good agent is very valuable in and of itself, and it may be worth setting aside a particular book to continue that relationship, particularly if you trust your agent’s opinion. You always need your agent to be excited about what he’s selling: if he’s not, then you don’t want him to be out there selling it. (Keep in mind that I say “chances are,” because this business is not a science, and there is always a remote possibility that your agent, who had always been right in the past, makes a mistake in this case, and

steers you away from writing the next *Da Vinci Code*. One never knows.)

On the other hand, if your agent has never landed you any book deals, and if you come to him with a new manuscript which you feel strongly about and he rejects it, then it may be time to look elsewhere—particularly if he is unwilling to give you good reasons for his rejection, or to help brainstorm with you to come up with something more marketable.

In either case, before making the decision to terminate the relationship, get some objective feedback: share your manuscript with several trusted readers. If they all have issues with it, too, then it may help you realize that your agent is in the right.

More importantly, there are steps you can take to make sure you don't end up in this situation to begin with. First, you can—and should—bring your agent in at the very beginning of the process: share your concept with him before you begin writing. If he doesn't like it, ask him why. There may be a good reason: perhaps he knows of competitive proposals, or recalls similar proposals that weren't able to find a publisher or that performed poorly as published books. Perhaps he can help you fine-tune the concept, or brainstorm to help you come up with a new concept altogether.

If you are writing fiction, you can share pages with him as you go: for example, before spending years writing 500 pages, stop at page 50 and show him the pages and a detailed synopsis for the rest. If he's a good agent, he should be able to make an evaluation based on this. If he doesn't like it, it can save you years of writing.

Agents will appreciate that you respect them enough to bring them in early, and it will make them

feel more invested in the project. If you don't trust your agent's opinion enough to do this, then he probably shouldn't be your agent to begin with. And if you are the type of author who writes whatever he feels like writing, regardless of what others think, then you need to realize that a long term career in publishing needs to be collaborative.

That said, there is always the human factor: agents have been wrong about many famous books in the past, and they will be wrong many times in the future. In this industry, one can only make an educated guess. If you have a burning passion for a particular manuscript you've written, and your gut screams that you should go elsewhere, then sometimes you will need to listen to that. Just don't make the decision hastily: in my book, [*How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent*](#), I discuss the six reasons to drop an agent, and all the factors you must consider carefully before doing so. If you terminate the relationship over a particular manuscript, you may find yourself in a position where you cannot sell the new manuscript and cannot find a new agent.

Why won't publishers respond?

“Mr. Lukeman, maybe you could comment on the problem of even getting publishers to look at a manuscript. My frustrating experience has been that they simply ignore it, do not send it back even when you've included an SASE, and do not answer your polite inquiries by mail, even a year or two later. This has happened to me more than once. I've submitted the first 20 pages of my novel as per submissions requirements for a number of publishers, and even though their website says they'll answer in, say, four months, they just ignore my submission and keep it for years. I never hear a word from them. I can't even get my 20 pages back from them because they don't bother answering inquiries. This seems to be standard practice in the publishing industry these days. How does a writer get around this?”

--Anonymous

To begin with, you need to find a literary agent first. In the vast majority of cases, editors at major publishers won't even consider a submission (whether it's a query letter, 20 pages, or an entire manuscript) unless it comes from a reputable literary agent. They will likely just send back a form letter stating that you must submit through an agent--or they may discard your pages and not respond at all. Most likely, your package was opened by an assistant (or an intern), and the editor in question never even knew of its existence.

Second, in your case it sounds as if you are concerned about getting your submitted pages returned

to you. As a rule of thumb, when you submit pages, assume that they won't be returned. Even if they are returned, they will rarely be in pristine condition, and you certainly won't want to recirculate worn pages for a new submission. If your submitted material is so important to you that you absolutely must have it back (for example, original documents or photographs), then you must be certain in advance that the recipient is aware that you are sending it and is willing to return it.

Third, when you do approach agents, I would strongly recommend your approaching them with a one page query letter, as opposed to sending 20 pages (I discuss this topic at length in my free book, [*How to Write a Great Query Letter*](#)). I would also suggest your approaching a large number of agents simultaneously (at least 50), so that you are not sitting around for a year waiting to hear. As a rule of thumb, a query letter should be responded to within 2 to 6 weeks, a proposal within 4 to 8 weeks, and a finished manuscript within 6 to 12 weeks; there is no reason you should ever have to wait an entire year for anyone. If you haven't heard after 4 months, you likely never will.

[How long should I wait to hear back about my manuscript?](#)

"There is a local, regional publisher interested in the project I have submitted to her, however she says she doesn't have time to read it all now. Would it be disloyal for me to submit it to another publisher?"

--Anonymous

Waiting time can be a major issue in most authors' writing careers. I can't begin to tell you how many authors I've met who tell me that they won't submit their manuscript elsewhere—or even begin to think about writing a new book—until they first hear back from a particular agent or publisher. When I ask them how long they've been waiting, they often say several months. Some tell me they've been waiting for *years*, putting their career on hold all of this time.

This is problematic for several reasons: first, because publishing is so subjective, and because agents' and editors' needs change so often, it is impossible to predict if any given agent or editor will like your work, no matter how likely they may seem. You must understand that, statistically, the chances are that any given submission will end in rejection. This is why getting published is mostly about the numbers: the author who submits to 50 or 100 agents or publishers will stand a much greater chance of getting published than the author who submits to 10. Thus the author who submits to only a few people and who then sits back waiting to hear is in all likelihood just wasting his time.

Second, publishing is a slow industry to begin with. It takes time to read a 300 or 400 page manuscript: the average response time for a 400 page manuscript will be at least 6 to 8 weeks. If you want to submit to 50 agents, there is no way you can do so by submitting to one person at a time, unless you are willing to spend five years submitting a particular manuscript (which I would never advise). An aggressive submission can—and should—successfully reach 50 or 100 agents within 6 months. You cannot achieve this unless you are submitting widely, and simultaneously.

Third, if you put your life on hold and spend months waiting for just one response, chances are that, with nothing else to do, you will dwell on this person, and will invest a lot emotionally on his response. If the response finally comes and it is a rejection, it will upset you much more. But if you had had your manuscript out with 100 agents, and 5 rejections had landed in a single day, it would hardly phase you: you would tell yourself that it is still out with 95 others. This will make the psychological roller-coaster of a submission much easier to handle. And it is important to manage the psychology of a submission.

Fourth, you should not look to the industry for validation. Many authors tell me that they will wait to hear whether the industry accepts their novel before they consider whether to continue writing. This is a big mistake. You must remember how subjective the industry is, and realize that even if 100 agents reject your manuscript, it doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't eminently publishable. You must reach a point where *you* are satisfied with your work. When you do, get behind it and stay behind it, regardless of how many rejections come in.

Finally, there should never be any downtime in your writing. Writing is a muscle, and the more you

write, the better you will become. When you finish one book, turn immediately to the next, and don't use a submission as an excuse to take a break and not do the hard work of continuing to write every day. A writer should never be "waiting"— only "writing" or "submitting." In fact, the word "waiting" should not even exist in the successful author's vocabulary.

You may encounter some agents or editors who demand that you give them exclusive reading time. If they are legitimate, and sincerely like your work, then in select cases, you might grant them exclusive reading time—but only for a finite period of time, which should be clearly stated in your letter. Otherwise, don't submit exclusively. You don't owe "loyalty" to an agent or editor who you've never met and who may not even like your work. You do, however, owe loyalty to yourself. As an author, there are so few things you can control in this industry. Waiting time is one of them. And it should indeed stay in your control.

[How many copies must a book sell to be considered a success?](#)

"I would be curious what it means to 'sell poorly' at a major house. Isn't this subject to interpretation? Okay, we can all agree that selling 500 or 1000 books from a major house means that a book did poorly. But a first novel by a first-time author except in some rare cases) isn't going to sell 50,000 copies anyway, so what kinds of numbers do big houses expect? And how do those numbers change depending on the genre?"

--J.L. Powers

This is a sophisticated question, and to answer it thoroughly will require a sophisticated response, one which first takes a step back and educates you on the mechanics and realities of how book sales truly work.

To begin with, one must know precisely what they speak of when they say “copies sold.” That term is used too loosely, often by authors who don’t truly know what it means, and as a result, publishing professionals are skeptical of any declaration of how many copies a book sold until they’ve have a chance to review all of the information for themselves. To accurately gauge book sales, the publishing professional needs to actually know four factors: 1) the number of copies printed; 2) the number of copies shipped; 3) the number of copies returned; and 4) the format of the book. For example, a publisher can print 100,000 copies of a book, but might only get bookstore orders for 10,000 copies, and thus only actually ship 10,000 copies. This would leave 90,000 copies sitting in the warehouse, and would be a disastrous (and extreme) scenario for a book publisher. A more likely

scenario is that a publisher prints 15,000 copies and ships 10,000 of them to start. Thus, to begin with, we have the (important) difference between copies *printed* and copies actually *shipped*.

Further complicating matters, bookstores retain the right to return unsold copies of books to publishers, and these “returns” start to trickle back within a few months after a book ships. (Nearly every book suffers from returns, and the average return rate for a book is approximately 25%. This is why publishers will hold back money due you at royalty time, as a “reserve against returns.”)

Within 6 to 12 months of a book’s shipping, most returns will have come in, so it usually takes at least 9 months from the time a book is published to know how many copies the book “netted.” If a publisher prints 15,000 copies of a book and ships 10,000 copies, and six months later 8,000 copies are returned, then that book has only netted 2,000 copies. That is the real number. In this scenario, an author might unknowingly boast that his book sold 15,000 copies (based on the print run) or 10,000 copies (based on the copies shipped), but in reality, after returns, his book has only “sold” 2,000 copies. It is all about the net.

Finally, to complete the picture, a publishing professional must also know the format of the book. A book might be published as a \$50 coffee table book, or a \$25 hardcover, or a \$14 trade paperback, or a \$7 mass market. If a book sold 2,000 copies at \$50 or at \$7, that makes a huge difference. 30,000 copies sold of a hardcover, for example, could be a huge success for a publisher, while 30,000 copies sold of a mass market edition might amount to a huge loss. So getting a complete picture of what a book truly “sold” is all about the net *and* the format.

Additionally, many books are published in multiple editions—often first as a hardcover, then a year later as a paperback—and it may be that a book only sold only 2,000 hardcover copies, but later sold

60,000 trade paperbacks. So to get an accurate picture of how many copies any book “sold,” one must tally up and take into account *all* of the editions of that book.

Now that you know what it means to accurately talk about how many copies a book truly “sold” from a publishing professional’s perspective, let’s look at some actual numbers.

We would all love to have that magic number, to know that, for example, 14,000 copies is the number you need to assure success and a life of future book deals. It is only natural that any author, after being published, would want to know how many copies he or she would need to sell in order to be considered a success. Yet if you ask your editor or agent this question, it is quite likely that they will hesitate in giving you a response. It is easy to gauge if a book is a huge failure, selling only 100 copies, or if it is a huge success, selling 100,000 hardcovers—but what if it falls into that gray area? What if it sells 7,000 hardcovers? Or 11,000 trade paperbacks? Indeed, this is one of the hardest questions for any publishing professional to answer. Most won’t even try to answer it, for fear of quoting a wrong number, or simply because even they don’t know how. That said, let me attempt to give you an answer here.

The most important factor in considering whether a book is a success is comparing the size of the advance to the number of copies sold. If a publisher paid a \$3,000 advance and netted 10,000 hardcovers, then that book was a success. If a publisher paid a \$200,000 advance for that same book, then those same number of copies amount to a failure.

Interestingly, for this very reason, some agents could argue that it is best *not* to negotiate too large of an advance for an author, thus assuring that the author will always be profitable for their publisher

and will thus publish as many books as possible—and thus have more chances to land a major hit. These agents would reason that the author will make up the money on the backend, through royalties. Other agents could argue that what is most important is landing the largest advance possible—whether or not their author lands a subsequent book deal—since the majority of books won't earn back their advance anyway.

All of this still begs the question: if you sold 7,000 hardcovers or 11,000 trade paperbacks and have to go out and find a new publisher for a subsequent book, would that sales record be sufficient to impress? What is the actual number of copies that will assure success? Here are some real numbers:

Most debut literary story collections net approximately 2,000 hardcover copies. Most literary first novels net between 3,000 and 7,000 hardcover copies. Most commercial first novels net between 5,000 and 10,000 hardcover copies. Non-fiction is genre specific, so one would have to take into account whether one were dealing with relationships, parenting, dieting, health, business, history, memoir—or whatever the genre—before one could offer approximations. That said, netting at least 20,000 hardcovers in any genre will usually be enough to make any publisher pay serious attention to your next book.

This is not to say that if one sold only 2,500 hardcover copies of a literary first novel that he is a dismal failure, or that if one sold 7,500 hardcovers of a literary first novel that he is guaranteed a subsequent book deal. Again, publishers will look at the whole picture when making a decision, including the number of copies you sold relative to the publisher and to the advance paid. If you sold 7,500 hardcovers after a \$200,000 marketing campaign, it will not bode well; and if you netted 2,500 hardcovers after being published by a tiny press with no reviews or publicity, then that may

bode well.

To further complicate matters, the concept and quality of the writing at hand might just make all of these numbers irrelevant. If a publisher falls in love with your new concept, he may very well want to buy your next book, even if your previous book sold miserably. I recall a situation where I had an author who didn't earn back his \$15,000 advance with one publisher, yet I sold his new proposal to a new publisher for a \$200,000 advance because they loved the new concept so much. Conversely, you can sell a ton of copies and not land a subsequent book deal if no one likes your new concept, or if they don't feel your writing is of the quality that it was in the past. I have seen situations like these, as well.

Obviously, if you are selling 100,000 hardcovers, you have little to worry about. Excluding that, there really is no magic number that will guarantee you a life of successful publishing. As I discuss at length in my book [*How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent*](#), there will be always be so many factors taken into account, in addition to past sales figures, when trying to land a new book deal, including timing, the current market, and personal, subjective taste. Unfortunately, even selling well will not necessarily assure you a solid future in this precarious business; yet the good news is that selling poorly will not necessarily seal your fate either.

The most important thing for you, as an author, is to try not to pay attention to any of this, to keep writing, to keep querying, and to never, ever give up—whether it's after one book, or after ten.

Will being published by a small press help my career?

"I'm curious how small-press published books are viewed by industry professionals. My book was repped by a top agent but didn't sell. Now I'm at a crossroads: seek out a small/mid-size press or scrap the book. I've heard from more than one source that publishers and bookstores will look only at the number of books sold without taking into consideration the size of the press. I guess the larger question is, is a small/mid-size press really a good stepping stone? My goal is to have a thriving career as a mystery author.

Thank you."

--Anonymous

The first thing you must know is that the term "small press" can mean anything, and that there is a world of difference between one small press and another. Anyone can launch a "small press" from their living room by publishing one or two titles, giving them tiny print runs, and sending them out into the world with little or no distribution or review coverage. With a fancy website, a nice logo, and some key listings in small press directories, this "small press" can appear, at first glance, to be as much of a small press as one that has genuinely published dozens of titles over many years.

If you are talking about one of the legitimate and prestigious small/mid-size presses, such as Algonquin, Overlook, Coffee House, Graywolf, Soho, or Pegasus (to name a few), then yes, being

published by them can certainly make a major difference in your career—indeed, a publication with any of these can lead to more review coverage, better distribution and better sales than with a major publisher. The excellent small/mid-size presses tend to put a lot of time and attention into each and every title, and sometimes this can pay off. I recall a situation about ten years ago when I represented an author who had two books published at nearly the same time, one with a prestigious small press, the other with a major publisher. The small press publication sold triple the copies and garnered far more review attention.

That said, I have encountered many authors who have a fantasy that, if their book does not find a major publisher, they can always turn to a small press. Not true. While there are hundreds if not thousands of “small presses” out there, there are actually very few prestigious and influential small/mid-size presses. These few small presses tend to receive as many submissions as the major publishers, and it has been my experience that they are at least as selective as the major publishers, and sometimes even more so. I recall many submissions where a prestigious small press rejected a book, only to have a major publisher acquire it.

If you are considering being published by a small press, and it is not one of the few prestigious small presses, then in most cases I would say, don't do it. Instead, put your manuscript in a drawer and write another book. If you sell subsequent books to major houses, then your unpublished manuscripts can be valuable, as your new publisher may want to acquire them all at some point down the road. I recall an instance where an author I represented could not land several novels, and his three unpublished novels sat in his drawer for ten years. When I finally got him his big break with a major house, that house wanted to take all of his novels, and he suddenly found himself with four advances and four books coming out in quick succession. In this case, it was better for him to

have these rights free when the time came than to have had them tied up by an ineffectual press.

Finally, keep in mind that many of the prestigious small presses won't consider your manuscript unless it is submitted by an agent—or at the very least, they won't take it as seriously. So it is really best to focus your energy on writing the best book you can, and then finding an agent. A good agent will know which small presses to keep in mind, and when to include them in a submission.

Can self-publishing damage your career?

“More than a few writers are turning to POD publishing after their agent cannot sell their book, or after they can't get an agent to rep their book. When they go to sell the next book, will this POD or self publishing work against them if they end up selling only a few thousand books? Is it better to do an ebook or think of another way to get their material before their readers that doesn't generate an ISBN number?”

--question asked by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett on behalf of The American Society of Journalists and Authors. Barbara is host of “Writers on Writing,” a weekly radio show airing on KUCI-FM (88.9) in California.

Understandably, authors worry that self-publishing their book with a print on demand (POD) service could end up hurting them in the long run. They worry that an assigned ISBN could track their book's sales, and that if sales are weak, a future publisher will reject future books based on their track record.

But there is nothing to fear. Publishers are sophisticated enough to differentiate whether an author's prior books sold poorly as a result of being published in a POD format or as a result of being published by a major publisher. If an author's books were published by a major publisher and sold poorly, then yes, this would be a major problem for a future acquiring editor. But if the poor sales were the result of a POD edition, then all is forgiven, and the author is treated as if he had never

been published at all. And if the sales were strong, the POD edition can become an asset.

This has been my experience as a literary agent. I also discussed this question with an editor at a major publishing house, and he concurred.

This topic also begs the broader question: whether to self-publish at all. Keep in mind that the majority of authors who self-publish will find that just because they “published” their book and perhaps even built a website, it doesn’t necessarily mean the masses have shown up to buy it, or that they’ve been able to draw review attention. I would guess that most self-published books sell but a few dozen copies to family and friends, and sadly, never lead to a book deal.

If you want to self-publish merely for personal satisfaction, or to share your book with family and friends, then by all means, do it. But if you are embarking on this path solely for commercial reasons—as a way to land a book deal with a major publisher—then I would say only do it if you realize that 1) the chances of this happening are remote; and 2) you are going to have to put a huge amount of time and effort into bringing traffic, attention and publicity to your book online. If you have 100,000 followers of Twitter, or a video with 500,000 views on youtube, or an e-zine with 100,000 subscribers, then you may be a good candidate for self-publishing. If you can manage to sell 5,000 or 10,000 copies on your own, if you can manage to land one or two major reviews in established venues, you may be able to defy the odds and land an agent or publisher. Online, it’s all about what you bring to the table and how hard you are willing to work. Which is, in fact, good training for being published by a major publisher. Successful traditionally-published books also have in common authors who bring their own resources to the table, and who push their own books relentlessly over extended periods of time.

Ultimately, the same factors that affect a traditionally-published book's success will also affect the success of a self-published book: does your book have a unique concept? Does it have competition? Is there a large market for the genre? Do you have the means to reach out effectively to the market that needs to know about it? How strong are your writing skills, and how well-written is your book?

If you have something important to say and say it well, your book will eventually find its audience. If not, technology can never replace quality.

[Is there a market for literary fiction set in a country outside of the United States?](#)

Question: Is there a market for literary fiction set in a country outside of the United States (for example, India)?

There is always a market for great fiction (and great books, in general), regardless of whether they are set in or outside of the United States (as has been proved by many recent bestsellers set in other countries). There is no reason why your novel's being set in another country (for example, India) should be a deterrent to its sale, or should make it harder for you to land a literary agent.

As an agent, I myself was never biased against a particular work because of its being set in another country. Of much greater importance to me was the strength of the writing, the depth of the characters, the richness of the plot, the authenticity of the dialogue. If all of these (and other) elements were there, then the country was of no consequence. What is important, however, is that, artistically, the country (or the setting, in general) be authentically inherent to the other elements, and not forced onto the work simply for the sake of it.

That said, there have certainly been times in my career when I've heard back from an editor that he or she felt that a particular manuscript was too inherent to a particular country to be successful in the U.S., or heard back from a European publisher that a particular manuscript was too inherent to

the U.S. to be successful in Europe. So there may be exceptions, depending of course on the work. But overall, I believe that universal truths will be recognized across countries and across continents: love, revenge, ambition, resolution, conflict...if an author taps into the essence of humanity in any given work, it will surely be embraced worldwide.

So my advice is to write what you know, and to focus on creating the best possible work. Once you achieve that, the setting should not be an issue.

Can I be represented by two literary agents?

Question: How unusual is it to have two agents? I have one novel signed with a British agent now, and they are looking at my second book. IF they decide it's not for them, I'll look elsewhere, of course. Just wondered how uncommon that would be?

The standard response would be to tell you that, in the majority of cases, literary agents will only work with an author on an exclusive basis. From an agent's perspective, there are many (justifiable) reasons for this, including the fact that there are option and non-compete clauses built into publishing agreements, and that if another agent were to represent other works by the same author, the legalities could become infinitely complex. There are subsidiary rights issues, too. The shaping of the author's career also becomes a problem, since agents often like to help "build" an author in a certain direction—and if another agent were involved, this could become impossible. There is also the simple financial fact that it can take years of hard work to build an author's career, and one agent would not want to devote so much effort only to see another agent reap the benefits. And finally, the exclusive agent-author relationship is standard industry etiquette, and thus a publisher, knowing that an author is represented by one agent, would be quite surprised to receive a work by that same author submitted simultaneously by a different agent—and would probably not even know how to respond.

That said, as with everything in book publishing, this can become more complex, and the issue is

not always so black and white. For me to give you a thorough response, I would have to take into account many factors. The answer will ultimately vary in each case, depending on the agent, the author, the publisher, and the work(s) in question. For example, it would be very unusual (if not impossible) for a novelist to have two different literary agents representing two different novels of his simultaneously. However, what if a novelist decides he wants to write non-fiction for his next book? And his agent only represents fiction? Will that agent be OK with his looking for a separate agent to handle his non-fiction?

There is certainly more leeway in the scenario of an author switching from fiction to non-fiction, and some agents will be fine with that, and will even recommend agents and/or give the author their blessing. Other agents, though, will not. If an agent is part of a bigger agency, he will, if possible, want to keep the author in-house at the agency, and have another agent in his company represent the non-fiction (which is usually fine). However, if his colleague doesn't want to represent the non-fiction (as is often the case), then the agent may not want his author searching elsewhere for an agent to represent the non-fiction. Agents can be territorial, and they may become worried that if their novelist finds another agent to represent his non-fiction, then their client may end up, in the long run, switching to that other agency for his fiction, too. They also will not want their novelist devoting years to writing non-fiction, which are years which could have been spent continuing to write fiction (and vice versa with non-fiction versus fiction).

As an author, if you find yourself in a position where you are switching genres and must decide whether you want to have this conversation with your agent and look for a second (simultaneous) agent, you should take into account many factors. For example, if you are a novelist, and your agent has represented you for many years, and has landed you several deals for hundreds of thousands of

dollars, is it really worth it to jeopardize the relationship in order to go out and find another agency to represent a one-time non-fiction concept? Conversely, if you are a novelist and have been with your agent for years and he has not landed you any deals, and you now want to make a true, lifelong career switch to non-fiction, then it may make more sense for you to find a non-fiction agent, whatever the price.

Just know that, whatever you decide, with most agents, the notion of your being represented simultaneously by another agency will usually strain the relationship. Whether it's worth it is a decision only you can make.

Should I finish the manuscript of my novel before submitting to agents?

Question: I am currently working on a novel that I believe is very unique in the murder/mystery genre. My work is about 10,000 words currently, headed for about 110,000-120,000. Would an agent take me on at this stage of the game or do I need a completed work?

A good question. If you've written a novel, never query an agent unless your manuscript is finished and in its absolute final draft. Ideally, this final draft has not only been revised dozens of times over several months, but has also taken into account feedback from trusted, impartial readers. Your querying an agent should not be viewed as an opportunity to enter into a back and forth. Is not a dialogue: it is a one way conversation. You are requesting representation and he is responding Yes or No.

In rare cases an agent may be intrigued enough by your work to request a revision. But in the vast majority of cases, this will not happen. If an agent does not like your work, he will not ask you to revise, or be willing to read another draft. Thus your approach is your one and only shot, and it must represent the final, best work you have to offer.

That said, there are always exceptions. There have been instances in my career when I've sold a partial fiction manuscript for a very significant advance. In such cases, though, these partials will

often comprise at least 200 or 300 pages, include a detailed synopsis for the remainder of the book, and will have been written by authors who have already published several novels with major houses. Even then, I do not advise your stopping at page 200 or 300 for a submission's sake. If you can write 300 pages, you can write 400, and it's always best to have the finished manuscript in hand beforehand.

When it comes to non-fiction, though, the requirements are different: you always approach with an unfinished work. The vast majority of non-fiction is sold based upon a professional non-fiction book proposal, which comprises but one or two sample chapters and rarely exceeds 40 or 50 pages. (I discuss this topic at length in my book [*How to Land \(and Keep\) a Literary Agent*](#).) If you are unable to find representation, or if your agent is unable to land you a deal, then you would have wasted your time writing the entire manuscript in advance. But just because you are dealing with 40 or 50 pages, don't think a first draft will suffice: as with fiction, these pages must be in the best possible shape.

This all points to a broader issue. In general, there is a stark difference in the publishing industry between fiction and non-fiction: many editors, for example, are only allowed by their publisher to acquire either fiction or non-fiction, and many publishers and imprints will publish either fiction or non-fiction. Editors of non-fiction tend to lunch with agents of non-fiction, and the same holds true with fiction. There are circles within circles in the publishing industry. You, as the author, must realize there is a stark divide, and never assume that the same rules that apply to fiction also apply to non-fiction. The more you pay attention to the detailed, specific rules which apply to each genre, the greater the likelihood of your landing a deal.

[Do agents really read the first five pages? Or just the first five sentences?](#)

Question: I have purchased your book, *The First Five Pages*, and found it to be very valuable. I wonder, however, how likely it is that an over-worked literary agent (or editor) would have the time to read those first five pages. I would like to know what you think of making the first five sentences (or paragraphs, if need be) as vital and as impossible to ignore as those five pages?

This is a good question and shows that you are thinking in the right way, since you already realize that an author does not have the luxury of time or space in catching an agent's or editor's attention. Ten years ago, I wrote in the introduction of my book, *The First Five Pages*, that the title should have really been *The First Five Sentences*, since most agents will make a determination based upon these. This still holds true. An experienced literary agent can, in most cases, determine an author's writing ability within just a few sentences. Agents *have* to: if they don't have this ability, there is simply no way they will be able to survive, to sift through the thousands of manuscripts that cross their desk every year.

So, yes, it is vital that your first five sentences be as well written as your first five pages. But don't let this become an excuse to labor over the first five sentences (and the first five pages) and then let the rest of your manuscript fall apart. My point all throughout *The First Five Pages* was never for an author to merely labor over the first five pages, but rather that these first five pages serve as a

microcosm for the rest of the book: if, for example, you overuse adjectives and adverbs in the opening pages, then you likely overuse them throughout the rest of your manuscript. The point was to take a step back, examine and revise your first five pages intensively, then take what you've learned and apply this throughout the rest of your work. The most important lesson you will walk away with is the one of craftsmanship: if you spend an entire month on your opening page, an entire week on your opening paragraph, this will change your work ethic and raise your standards dramatically. You can then apply these standards throughout the rest of your manuscript.

That is the value of your first five pages.

[What do you look for in a logline?](#)

Question: Authors read about the need for a condensed hook, a one or two sentence summary of a novel's premise that will inspire an interested party to read more. What do you look for in a hook? What should an author incorporate in a hook?

This is a great question, and I devote many pages to discussing this in my free e-book, [How to Write a Great Query Letter](#). The short answer:

It is important for an author to prepare a logline (sometimes referred to as a “tagline” or as “a one (or two) sentence summary”), because some agents will ask for it, because it will help you condense your query letter, and perhaps most importantly, because the act of condensing your 300 or 400 page work to a mere one or two sentences is a pivotal exercise for every author. The process will force you to examine your work in a whole new light and to ask yourself hard questions about what it is really about. It will also help you understand your work from the perspective of those who will have to market it, whether it is an agent, editor, sales rep or bookseller. And it will force you, creatively, to face the very essence of what your work is about.

The question authors most fear is, “What is your work about?” When confronted with such a question, we usually either find ourselves at a loss for words, or find ourselves spending ten minutes poorly explaining our work. It is the rare author who can summarize his own work instantly, without blinking, in a pithy manner, with eloquence and brevity. This should be your goal. If you can get to

the point where you can achieve this verbally, in a social situation, then you will have reached the point where you can achieve this on the page. Writing, after all, is merely thought applied to paper.

From an agent's perspective, specificity is all. This shouldn't be too surprising, because all good writing is specific. As I discuss at length in my book, location, time period and comparison are three vital tools that will help you get there. You can write "My novel is set in America," or be more specific and write, "My novel is set in New York," or go further, "My novel is set in East Harlem." The more specific you get, the stronger the imagery. You could write, "My novel takes place over a short period of time," or "My novel takes place over a three day period in 1842." 1776. 1812. 1945. McMurdo Station, Antarctica. Mobile, Alabama. Reykjavik, Iceland. Dates, locations and time frames can tell us so much, and with little space. A relevant comparison to a successful book in your genre will help complete the picture, and do so in few words.

As you work on your logline, it may even spur you to reconsider revising your work itself. In this way, we begin to see how the process of creating a logline can be far more than just a marketing endeavor.

"How do I find out what agent represents a novel in my genre?"

This is an excellent question, and one I get asked often. There are many ways to go about this, and to do this research thoroughly, the right way, will take much time and effort. That said, here are three quick ways to help start your search:

1) Visit www.publishersmarketplace.com and click “Deals.” Under “Browse deals” set the drop-down tab for Year to 2009 (also do this search for 2008 and 2007). Set the “categories” drop-down tab to the genre of your work (for example, “Fiction/Thriller”) and click Browse. I just tried it in the “Thriller” genre, and it returned 53 deals for 2009 and 116 more for 2008, totalling 169 reported deals for just the last year and a half. Scan through each and you will find the name of the agent who made the deal.

2) Visit www.publishersmarketplace.com and click “Top Dealmakers.” Set the Dealmaker drop-down tab to “Agents” and set the Deals category to the genre of your work (for example, Fiction/Thriller). I just did it and it returned information on the top 100 agents who recently made deals in the genre—and even sorted them in order of the number of deals.

3) Visit <http://books.google.com/> and in the search tab type the key word “Acknowledgments,” and then (separately) type in the name of relevant authors and books in your genre. It may bring up the acknowledgments pages of relevant books, and these may mention the names of the agents.

As I said, all of this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more ways to go about this (I discuss this topic at length in my book, [*How to Land and Keep a Literary Agent*](#)). Also keep in mind that, aside from the genre, there are many additional factors you must consider in order to properly evaluate whether an agent is the right one for your work.

About the Author

Noah Lukeman is President of Lukeman Literary Management Ltd, which he founded in 1996. His clients include winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, American Book Award, Pushcart Prize and O. Henry Award, finalists for the National Book Award, Edgar Award, and Pacific Rim prize, multiple *New York Times* bestsellers, national journalists, major celebrities, and faculty of universities ranging from Harvard to Stanford. He has also worked in the New York office of a multi-talent management company, where he represented many *New York Times* Bestsellers, and, prior to founding his agency, he also worked for another New York literary agency. Prior to becoming an agent he worked in the editorial departments of several publishers, including William Morrow, Delphinium Books and Farrar, Straus, Giroux, and as editor of a literary magazine. He was creator of PrePub.com, one of the first publishing rights websites, which eventually became the "Booktracker" division of Inside.com. As a literary agent, he has been written up in media ranging from *The New York Times* to *Variety* (Page 1).

Noah Lukeman is also an accomplished author. His best-selling [*The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile*](#) (Simon & Schuster, 1999), was a selection of many of Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers and is now part of the curriculum in many universities. His [*The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life*](#) (St. Martins Press, 2002) was a National Bestseller, a BookSense 76 Selection, a *Publishers Weekly* Daily pick, a selection of the Writers Digest Book Club, and a selection of many of Writer's Digest 101 Best Websites for Writers. His [*A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*](#) (W.W. Norton, 2006 and Oxford University Press in the UK, 2007) was critically-acclaimed, a selection of the Writers Digest Book Club, a selection of the Forbes Book Club and profiled on NPR, and is now part of the curriculum in over 50 universities and writing programs. His e-book *How to Write a Great Query Letter*, which he gives away for free as a way of giving back to the writing community, was the #1 Bestselling title on Amazon Shorts for over a year. To help

aspiring authors, he has made available over 100 free pages from his books at www.noahlukeman.com

Noah has also worked as a collaborator, and is co-author, with Lieutenant General Michael “Rifle” Delong, USMC, Ret., of *Inside Centcom* (Regnery, 2005), a selection of the Military Book Club. His Op-Eds co-authored with General Delong appeared in the Sunday *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Dallas Morning News*. He has contributed articles about the publishing industry and the craft of writing to several magazines, including *Poets & Writers*, *Writers Digest*, *The Writer*, the *AWP Chronicle* and the *Writers Market*, and has been anthologized in *The Practical Writer* (Viking, 2004).

Creatively, Noah is author of [The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II](#), (Pegasus Books, 2008) an original play written in blank verse, which aspires to pick up where Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* left off. *Macbeth II* was critically-acclaimed, and featured as recommended reading in *New York Magazine*’s 2008 “Fall Preview.” He has also written several screenplays, one of which, *Brothers in Arms*, was chosen as one of Hollywood’s 100 Best Scripts of the Year on the 2007 Black List and is currently in development at a major studio.

Noah Lukeman has been a guest speaker on the subjects of writing and publishing at numerous forums, including Harvard University, The Juilliard School, the Wallace Stegner writing program at Stanford University, the Writers Digest Panel at Book Expo America, the MFA at Northern Michigan University, the National Society of Newspaper Columnist’s annual Boston conference, and Riker’s Island Penitentiary. He earned his B.A. with High Honors in English and Creative Writing from Brandeis University, *cum laude*.

To ask Mr. Lukeman questions about writing and publishing,
or to join his e-zine, please visit his blog:
www.askaliteraryagent.com

Mr. Lukeman has made this book free to help support the writing community.

If you wish, feel free to read and support his other books, including

How to Land (and Keep) a Literary Agent (www.landaliteraryagent.com)