

How to Land (and Keep)  
a Literary Agent

Noah Lukeman



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By

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## Introduction

As a literary agent, I've come into contact with thousands of authors over the years, and I can't begin to tell you how many of them tell me the same story: they spent years completing their manuscript, approached the publishing industry, were rejected, and then gave up. When I ask them what their "approach" consisted of, they invariably tell me they sent their manuscripts to a handful of agents (usually about six) over the course of one or two years. Based on those few rejections, they deemed themselves to have been officially turned down by the publishing industry.

When I inquire further, I discover in nearly every case that these authors not only approached agents inappropriate for their work, but also approached them in an amateur, improper way. As a result, their writing was never read by a single publishing professional for whom it might be appropriate. After years of working on their manuscripts, after laboring over every word, these authors never gave themselves a chance.

After years of working hard on a manuscript, you might, understandably, be excited and eager to share it with the world; your first impulse will be to immediately

get it onto the desks of those who might publish it. However, I assure you that rushing into the submission process will end up counteracting all of your hard work. Indeed, it never ceases to amaze me that writers will spend several years working on their manuscripts, yet only a few hours sealing its fate by hastily choosing a list of agents out of a random (usually outdated) directory, or by the first, random website they happen to stumble upon.

There do indeed exist many incredibly talented authors who will never get published, for the sole reason that they do not know how to approach the industry in the right way. It is depressing—not because they’ve been rejected by the publishing industry (in reality, they haven’t), but because a few simple tips could have saved them years of needless waiting, of putting their careers on hold—could have made the difference in their getting published. These simple, concrete tips are precisely what I will share with you in this book.

Before embarking on the journey of finding an agent, you must first have your query letter written, and in excellent shape. Writing the query letter is an art form in and of itself, and you’ll often find conflicting advice, making it even harder to grasp. Entire books have been devoted to it, and I have written one myself, *How to Write a Great Query Letter* ([www.writeagreatquery.com](http://www.writeagreatquery.com)), which I give away for free. If you have not already, I advise you to download it.

You must also first prepare to set aside a good deal of time and energy for the process of landing an agent. It is indeed a process, and I know that most of you, after so many years spent toiling on your books, will be in a rush to get it out the door and

into the hands of an agent. But you really must change your mindset and be prepared to not rush this process. Hurrying to choose agents and mail your query letter may give you some instant gratification, but you will likely receive nothing but rejections, and weeks or months later, you will come to learn, the hard way, that your alacrity did you no good.

You set aside much time to creating your work—now set aside equal time to research and choose the right agents. Switch modes to private detective, and learn to savor the process. And do indeed prepare for a lengthy process. This mindset alone will put you head and shoulders above your peers, the vast majority of whom are rushing to query just about any agent they can find. This mindset will also enable you to soldier on in an unemotional, disciplined manner for weeks or months at a time if your agent search doesn't at first yield results. This mindset of steady endurance and persistence (absent in so many impatient authors) will alone make the difference in your landing that agent.

The advice you're about to read in these pages has been tried and tested over many years: I've dispensed it to thousands of authors around the world, and I have heard back from so many of them that it was directly responsible for their finally being able to land an agent. It will work for you, too, if you are prepared to truly study and apply the principles I lay out here. They are simple—but then again, the most effective principles always are.

Most of all, enjoy the journey!

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## Chapter Four:

### How to Research Agents (35 Resources)

The reason 99% of manuscripts get rejected is, simply, because authors approach the wrong agents to begin with. As writers, we know there is no comparison between a good word and the *perfect* word. Similarly, there is no comparison between *any* agent and an *appropriate* agent.

To compile a list of appropriate agents, thorough research is required. Not three hours worth, but three *months* worth. Such information used to be difficult to obtain; I remember when I began working as a literary agent in 1995 (before the explosion of the internet), it was nearly impossible to find reliable sources of information listing the names of people in the industry. When one did find information, it tended to be hopelessly out of date. It didn't help that the book publishing industry has always been tight-lipped, wary of revealing any contact information to outsiders. If you were an author trying to get published back then,

your chances of finding good information were bleak. It made a hard task even harder.

All that has changed. Today's aspiring authors don't realize how easy they have it compared to aspiring authors of just ten years ago. Today, thanks to the internet, one can find accurate, up to the minute information—and find it within seconds, and often for free. Indeed, because of this, today's author, if he knows how to research, stands a much greater chance of getting published. He has all the tools for success behind him. All he needs is a wonderful book, and the will and persistence to find it a home.

To become a successfully published author, you have to wear many hats: as we discussed earlier, you will have to put on a publicist's hat at some point if you want to cultivate contacts, strengthen your bio and build your platform. Then, to accurately find the best agent for you, you will have to spend months putting on the hat of a private detective. If you truly want to make sure that your work is read by exactly the right people (which makes all the difference), then you just have to put in the time doing the research.

Below are several good resources to help get you started. I would advise you create a customized database of your own, using Excel or whatever database program you prefer. As you do your research, note not only the name of the agent and his agency, but also all the titles and authors he's represented. This information will be crucial later, when it comes time to approach the agent (more on this in Chapter 5).

Don't stop until you've gathered the names and contact information of at least 50 appropriate agents. (That's right, 50. More on this later, too.)

Before we jump into the specific resources, you are going to need to know what to be on the lookout for. Here are a few things to consider:

### **13 Factors to Consider When Evaluating an Agent.**

#### 1. Is he legitimate?

Does he charge a reading fee? If so, don't query him. There are many excellent agents that will read your query for free, and these are the ones you should approach. (We will discuss the topic of fee-charging agents at length in Chapter 7.)

#### 2. Fiction or non-fiction?

As discussed earlier, many agents will represent one or the other, but not both. As a starting point, make sure they are representing predominantly fiction (if you are a novelist) or non-fiction (if you are not).

#### 3. Literary or commercial?

Many agents tend to lean towards representing only literary or commercial work. As a starting point, make sure they are representing predominantly literary or commercial works, depending on what you have written.

#### 4. Historical or Contemporary (fiction)?

Many agents who represent fiction tend to lean towards representing either contemporary or historical fiction. As a starting point, make sure they are representing predominantly contemporary or historical, depending on what you have written.

#### 5. Practical or Narrative (non-fiction)?

Many agents who represent non-fiction tend to represent either practical (i.e. parenting, business) or narrative (i.e. history, biography) non-fiction. Memoir tends to fall into a class by itself. In any case, make sure they have a track record representing your particular genre.

#### 6. Hardcover or paperback?

There is a divide in the publishing industry between editors who publish hardcover or paperback editions; likewise, some agents will tend to represent more paperback original deals, while others will represent more hardcover deals. While it is possible to achieve a huge success with a paperback original, as a starting point, if given the option, it would be preferable for you to land a hardcover deal.

#### 7. How many deals have they made in their career?

There is a big difference between being represented by an agent who has consummated 5 deals in his career and one who has consummated 200. I've been an agent for 13 years and have consummated nearly 250 book deals, and yet even now, after all this time, no two book deals are the same. Every book deal has its own

unique issues, and there is no way to know what to expect without having simply done a certain amount of deals—and even then, you will always be surprised. Being a literary agent is one of those professions where experience is all. If you sign with an agent who has done only three deals, you take the risk of ending up with a deal or a contract which is not as good as it could have been.

That said, at the same time, you are far more likely to find an agent to represent you if you target those who have done fewer deals. So this is a fine line. There is nothing necessarily wrong with an agent who has only done a few deals—everyone has to start somewhere. But if you have two offers of representation, and one agent has done far more deals than the other, then, all things being equal, choose the latter.

8. How many deals have they made recently?

Perhaps an agent has done 200 deals in his career but has only made one deal in the past year; alternately, another agent may have only done 24 deals in his career, but did 15 of them in the past year. If you have to choose between the two, all things being equal, choose the latter. The publishing industry is a fleeting one; agents and editors come and go all the time. Like Hollywood, the industry is not about what you have done last year, but about what you have done *right now*. The agent who is active *now* is more likely to be more up to date with industry information.

9. What kind of publishers have they done deals with?

It's very telling to see not only how many deals an agent has done, but which publishers he has done them with. Has he done 20 deals, and are 18 of them with small presses? Has he done 12 deals, but all of them are with major publishers? Has he only done deals with academic publishers? Have 11 of his 12 deals been with the same publisher? Ideally, you want an agent who has done the vast majority of his deals with a broad variety of major publishers, since major publishers tend to pay the highest advances, print the most copies of your book, get the most review attention, and get the best distribution. Of course, there will always be exceptions—many small-presses prove this wrong—but as a rule of thumb, you do want to start with major publishers first. If a potential agent has only done deals with small publishers, for example, this is a major red flag.

#### 10. What kind of advances has he negotiated?

If an agent has done 40 deals, and none have been for six figure advances, it is a red flag; alternately, if another agent has done 12 deals, and 8 have been for six figure advances, you should lean towards him. (We will talk about how to determine the size of an agent's deals later in the chapter.) Some agents think big, while other agents don't; some agents have stronger negotiating skills than others; some are just better at what they do. I don't want to give you false hopes: landing an agent at all is a major accomplishment, and landing a book deal—for any advance—with a reputable publisher is an even greater accomplishment. There is nothing necessarily wrong with an agent getting you a \$10,000 advance, and in fact the vast majority of deals are for

less than six figures, and probably even for less than \$50,000. However, you don't want to limit yourself out the gate, and it's best to begin your search with agents who consistently land bigger deals.

11. Do you recognize any of the other authors he represents?

Just because an agent is representing "literary fiction," it doesn't necessarily mean he has great taste in books, or that he represents acclaimed authors. If two agents both equally want to represent you, and you know that one of them represents authors you've heard of and respect, and the other has authors you've never heard of, then it's a safer bet to go with the former. It does take time to build a client list, but if an agent has been in the business for 10 years and you still don't recognize a single author he represents, then it is a red flag.

12. Do you think you'd be a good match with his client list?

Based on the authors and books he represents, do you think you'd be a good match with his client list? If one agent represents ten clients and they are all major literary lions, and another represents ten clients and they are all first time novelists, and you yourself would be a first time novelist, chances are the latter would both be more likely to represent you and would give you more time and attention. Similarly, do you feel that the subject matter and style of the books he's represented are similar to yours? Do you instinctively feel that he would "get" your work? These are all important issues to consider.

Along these lines, you might begin by making a list of authors whom you respect and/or who are writing books similar to yours, and begin by approaching their agents. Although, of course, one never knows: if an agent has sold a book similar to yours, he might not want to take on a work too similar, for fear of competing with his own clients. Yet in the scheme of things, it is better to start with an agent who's representing work similar to yours.

### 13. How receptive is he to new clients?

If an agent has been in business for 5 years, he will be less likely to take on new clients—even less so if he has been an agent for 10 years. For example, when I started my own agency 13 years ago, I was very eager to take on new clients, and very receptive to query letters. Now I am not taking on new clients at all.

As a rule of thumb, beginning writers stand a much better chance of landing an agent if they target an agent who is just starting out, someone who has been an agent for three years or less, someone who has proven himself by securing at least a few deals with major houses but is actively looking for more clients. (This factor alone can make the difference in finding an agent.) Just because an agent is starting out doesn't make him any less competent or capable; in fact, it often makes him work harder on your behalf—which can make the difference in getting you your first deal.

Throughout the course of your research, keep in mind that you will rarely be able to find out all of the above information on any given agent. For example, you

might be able to find out about some of the clients he represents, but not how receptive he is to new clients; you might be able to find out how many deals he's done, but not how large the advances were; you might be able to find out about a few of his successful titles, but not about his entire range of deals. Not all publishing deals are reported to the press, and thus a website may tell you an agent has consummated 50 deals when in fact he has consummated 150.

Thus be careful not to rule out any given agent too soon: if you are serious about a potential agent, truly research deeply, and cross-reference as many sites and sources as you possibly can. Know that even with the best research, you will probably not be able to find out everything. Also know that even if you do find out everything, and even if all of your research points to the absolutely perfect agent for you, that agent might very well surprise you and not be interested at all; conversely, research might indicate that an agent is an unlikely match for you, and he may turn out to be perfect. None of this is a science.

This is why I say that, to maximize your chances of finding the most appropriate agent for you, it requires both thorough research and approaching as many agents as possible.

Now let's look at several specific resources that will help you do the research.

## **24 Free Resources for Researching Agents.**

1. [www.publisherslunch.com](http://www.publisherslunch.com) (the free version)

“Publishers Lunch” is a free e-newsletter (daily and weekly) that reports on the latest publishing deals and news. It offers two versions: a free and a paid version (more on the paid version later). The free version of the newsletter doesn’t report all of the deals, but it still covers many of them. This newsletter is one of the best resources for writers, for several reasons: it is free; it offers up to the minute information; it lands right in your email inbox; and it names the agents involved in the deals, names their agency, and offers a description of the book they sold. If you study this newsletter alone for several weeks, you will be able to start to build a list of appropriate agents for your work.

The only potential downside is that any agent (or editor) can report a deal, and thus it is possible that in any given week there might be agents mentioned who are not as effective as other agents, or who charge reading fees (more on this later). In general, use the criteria we discussed above when compiling your own list of agents—for example, look for agents who land deals with reputable publishers or who represent authors known to you. And of course, all information gathered here (as with any resource) should be cross-referenced against information gathered elsewhere.

2—4. [www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com) (contains 3 resources)

Publishersmarketplace.com is the umbrella site for Publisherslunch, and it offers many additional features that will be very useful for you. As with the

newsletter, there is both a free and a paid version (more on the paid version later). In the free version there are three features in particular that will be of use to you: 1) a “SearchMembers” link which allows you to pull up and cross-reference accurate contact information for agents and agencies; 2) links to the “Top 10 most visited agents” on the site. If you follow these links you can learn more about them, their clients, and the deals they’ve done. This feature is updated frequently, so it’s worth checking back regularly, as you can find out about new agents almost every day; and 3) a ton of general news about the publishing industry. Many of these articles will reference the names of agents and agencies, and even if they don’t, it doesn’t hurt to be educated about what’s going on in the industry.

5—8. [www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com) (contains 4 resources)

The website for *Publishers Weekly* contains at least four excellent resources that will be of help to you: 1) the site has a “Deals” link that offers reliable, free information on major deals consummated in the previous week or so, listing names of agents. Keep in mind, though, that PW tends to be more exclusive than other sites when reporting deals. Many listings will likely be substantial (possibly six figures or more), which often means the reported agents are more established, which can mean they are less likely to take on new clients; 2) the site has a search box, which you can use to cross-reference information on individual agents and agencies; 3) the site offers a wealth of free articles and information about the industry; and 4) it offers a free

weekly e-newsletter, PW Daily. The industry information might not be as directly relevant to your needs, but, again, it only helps to absorb industry information—and you might even encounter an article that drops the name of an agent who interests you.

#### 9. Agency Web sites.

Most literary agencies now have their own websites. Typing the name of an agent or agency into a major search engine (like Google) will often yield the exact URL within seconds. Some agency sites are extensive, and you will be able to glean a lot of current information about the agency that you may not find elsewhere. Often you'll find a comprehensive client list, recent deals, current submission requirements and preferences, change of address or contact information. You may also discover that the agency is no longer accepting queries, which can save you time and energy.

#### 10. Search engines.

In addition to looking up specific agency websites, you can also browse the major search engines by typing in relevant search terms, such as “literary agent.” (I just tried “literary agent” on Google and it yielded 1.6 million hits, while “literary agency” yielded 851,000 hits.) Search engines will bring up countless links to excellent resources, such as directories of literary agencies. It can take you months to sort through all of these pages, and much of the information will be irrelevant, but

intensive browsing might just reveal an agency site or listing (or other piece of relevant information) you missed elsewhere. And it is invaluable for cross-checking.

## 11. Google Blog Search

In addition to searching the web pages of Google, you can also use the Google Blog search function. This will allow you to type in the name of an agent or agency and see what (if anything) appears about him or his company on the blogs. This may not necessarily reveal the most reliable information, but one never knows what might turn up.

Additionally, you can use Google blog search for general search terms, such as “literary agent” (just brought up 82,482 hits) or “literary agency” (just brought up 30,502 hits). This can yield interesting information which is not immediately apparent from the basic Google Web search function.

## 12—13. Twitter (2 resources)

The amount of content on Twitter has increased so much in the past few months alone, that no exhaustive web search would be complete without trying a separate search just on Twitter. You can type in an agent’s or agency’s name and see what comes up. One never knows. You might learn something new about that agent and/or you may even discover that that agent has his own Twitter account, which you can follow.

Additionally, there are now directories of agents who have a presence on twitter. For example, here are two links which track this:

[http://agentquery.leveragesoftware.com/group\\_discussion.aspx?DiscussionID=d696c822a8e24febb2b621e8974219df](http://agentquery.leveragesoftware.com/group_discussion.aspx?DiscussionID=d696c822a8e24febb2b621e8974219df)

or

<http://twitter.com/agentquery>

I am sure that over time that there will arise even more of these.

{END OF EXCERPT}

The complete book contains 180 additional pages.  
To download, visit [www.landaliteraryagent.com](http://www.landaliteraryagent.com)