If there’s one thing that aspiring writers think about, it’s how to get published and break into the industry. For many of us pursuing writing careers here at Metropolitan State, we don’t know the first thing about how to get started.

I’ve invited Peter Stampfel, Submissions Editor of DAW Books publishing house, to provide insight for prospective authors of the sci-fi/fantasy genre. For 36 years, Stampfel has been the first to view manuscripts. Stampfel and his colleagues helped discover such fantasy authors as Tad Williams, Patrick Rothfuss, and Mercedes Lackey. What follows is an edited and condensed version of that conversation.

**What are some of the qualities in a manuscript that jump out to you?**

If I want to keep on reading it. If I’m still reading after about 25 pages, I’ll put it aside for another look.

Really likable characters are important. Surprise me. Get the story going, hit the ground running, plot-wise. That’s the top three. We’re not interested in unhappy endings. Unlike mainstream, people who read genre fiction want uplift. Horrible things can happen, but then finally the light breaks through. Overcoming huge odds, unstoppable, powerful evil being thwarted, is a common wish…Many plots are struggles. Good people are fighting bad things, that is more compelling. Fiction requires conflict.

**What are some of the disqualifiers that make you immediately reject a manuscript?**

In most cases, by the first page it will let me know there’s no sense in going on. This is true of the majority of manuscripts. For instance, if the same word is used twice in the first paragraph, it’s a sign that skills are lacking…You want really interesting characters. I find that an earmark of a really good writer is really good names. Often, [manuscripts] come with maps. I look at the map and see what the places are called. Usually the names are pedestrian. They’re clunky, ill-chosen, unattractive words. They don’t roll off the tongue. Well thought-out names are not a needed feature; it’s just a thing that really good writers tend to have.

The writing keeps getting better and better. There are a lot of books that would have been easily commercial in the ‘70s and ‘80s, but [now] the business is dominated by the big book stores who are reluctant to take on a new writer. In order to publish a new writer, the writer has to be pretty phenomenal.

**What was it like when you came across Patrick Rothfuss’s manuscript for his first book, “The Name of the Wind”?**

It was actually Betsy [Wollheim] who came across Pat’s book. Betsy read the first page and thought, “My god. Here it is. The Holy Grail.” The book had been submitted to three publishers by our favorite agent, Matt Bialer. Both of the editors at the other publications were willing to pay more money. Betsy said [to Pat] “You have to come with us. I will put you on the New York Times best-sell[er] list.” … Patrick Rothfuss was an once-in-a-lifetime find.

“The Name of the Wind” starts with the main character in the bar. It talks about the three levels of silence. It’s one of the most gripping first pages I’ve ever seen in my life.

**What is the advantage to having an agent?**

Anyone can call themselves an agent. There are agents we know about, but most of the agented manuscripts we get are from self-proclaimed agents, who tend to not have a clue. Some of the manuscripts we see from them would have been unsuccessful three decades ago…As a rule, the unsolicited manuscripts tend to be of a higher quality, by-and-large, than the ones coming from agents. However, if it’s a reputable agent like Matt Bialer or Russell Galen, we can be sure that the quality is higher.

**How do you meet a reputable agent?**

It’s really hard to get an agent to look at your stuff. Your best bet is to do short fiction. Sci-fi and fantasy are about the only markets for commercial short fiction anymore. A majority of traditional writers start out writing as fans. Once you have been publishing short stories for a while [you get] some feedback and hopefully some notice.

**In 2012, you advised new authors not to submit manuscripts over 120,000 words; however, some of the most successful authors regularly produce far lengthier books. Comments?**

If you’re an unpublished writer, it’s a better use of your time to not write something that lengthy. I just rejected a book that this guy in Australia had been working on for seven to eight years. [He] would’ve been better served for a first novel to not have taken that much time.

**Are epic length books a fad, or are they here to stay?**

Most people want to read shorter things, as a rule. If the book is amazingly great, then they’re delighted with a big book. It’s harder to sell a really long book that isn’t phenomenal. People have less time between television, video games, and social media.

**You’ve said an author must be passionate about writing to be successful. You’ve also said that some authors have that passion, but no writing skills. What advice would you give to writers who have the passion, but have yet to develop the writing skills?**

If I was a passionate, but not-that-skilled a writer, I would self-publish. “Fifty Shades ofGrey” was self-published. There were a number of books that were rejected by publishers, then were self-published, and went on to be phenomenally successful.

Perseverance is extremely important. If you’re a real writer, you’ll be compelled to write whether you’re selling or not and you’ll just keep on doing it. The line used to be, ‘It’s one book in a thousand that’s publishable.’ I’ve found that it’s closer to one book in three or four thousand that is actually publishable.

**Have most of the manuscripts you’ve seen been professionally edited?**

Most of them have seen an editor before they got here. Just a guess, but a substantial number have been edited by someone besides the writer.

**How important is the cover page?**

No more than one page is the hard-and-fast rule. I don’t want to hear about your friends and relatives, or friends that aren’t relatives that say it’s great and that it’s gonna make a great movie. I’ve heard that, oh, you know, thousands of times, and it’s absolutely meaningless.

**Do you have any other suggestions?**

If you can attend a writer’s workshop, that’s good; if you have a writer’s circle, that’s good. Work with people doing the same thing, pick each other’s minds. Get a good editor. On the other hand, there are a lot of professional editors who are like con artists.

**How does one avoid a con artist editor?**

Ask which successful authors they have worked with, check Yelp, Better Business Bureau. Vet the hell out of them.