

Dos and don'ts of approaching a publisher

You want the book you've written to be published. So how do you set about it? Where will you send the typescript? Probably to a publisher, but to which one? Michael Legat offers guidelines on how to proceed.

Finding a publisher

Do your market research in public libraries and bookshops, and especially in *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*, to find out which publishers bring out the kind of book you have written. While looking at the *Yearbook* entries, note which publishers are willing to consider books submitted to them directly, rather than through an agent, and which require a letter of enquiry first. Incidentally, if you are hoping to interest an agent, they almost all want an enquiry letter first.

Enquiry letters

An enquiry letter should be businesslike. Don't grovel ('it would be an honour to be published by so distinguished a firm'), don't make jokes ('my Mum says it's smashing, but maybe you'll think she's prejudiced'), don't be aggressive ('I have chosen you to publish my book, kindly send me your terms by return'). It is a good idea to write to whichever editor in the publishing house is responsible for books of the kind you have written (a phone call will provide this information – but take care to get the right title and spelling of the editor's name). Enclose a stamped addressed envelope. Look at the examples of the two poor enquiry letters followed by a good one on page 5.

You may have noticed that none of the letters refers to sending a disk or email. Such submissions may well become standard in a few years' time, but that stage has not yet been reached. However, once a book has been accepted, the publisher will certainly want a copy of the book on disk if it is available.

Presentation

Assuming that a publishing firm agrees to look at your book, the editor will expect to see a well-presented typescript (sometimes called a manuscript, abbreviated to MS). Here are some dos and don'ts about its appearance.

Use a typewriter or a word processor, or get a secretarial service to translate your handwriting on to a disk. Don't expect a publisher to read a handwritten script, even if you have a fine Italian hand.

10 Any Street, Any Town,
Any County

Messrs Dickens and Thackray,
83 Demy Street,
London WC45 9BM

12th March

Dear Sirs,

May I please send for your consideration the novel
I have written.

Yours sincerely,

L. Hopeful

This letter is far too brief. It gives no information about the kind of novel the author wishes to submit, nor of its length, it doesn't include a sae, and it doesn't even reveal the writer's sex. And since the writer doesn't use a question mark and has misspelt 'Thackeray', it's a good bet that the book will need meticulous and time-consuming copy-editing.

Choose a good quality white A4 paper (preferably not continuous listing paper, or if you must use it, at least separate the pages and remove the perforated edges). Whatever paper you use don't type on both sides, and don't use single spacing (which publishers abhor, and usually refuse to read) – one side of the paper only and double spacing is the rule. And do leave a good margin, at least 3cm, all around the text, using the same margins throughout, so as to have the same number of lines on each page (except at the beginning and end of chapters). Double spacing and good margins allow space for your last-minute corrections to the typescript, for any copy-editor's amendments, and for instructions to the printer. And, not least in importance, a typescript in that style is much easier to read.

Always begin chapters on a new page. Justify on the left hand side only. Don't use blank lines between paragraphs (in the style of most typed letters nowadays), but indent the first line of each paragraph a few spaces. Blank lines should be used only to indicate a change of subject, or time, or scene, or viewpoint.

Be consistent in your choice of variant spellings, capitalisation, use of subheadings, etc. Make up your mind whether you are going to use -ise or -ize suffixes, for example, and whether, if 'village hall' appears in your text, you will type 'village hall' or Village Hall'.

For plays, use capitals for character names and underline stage directions or print them in italics. Use single spacing for dialogue, but leave a blank line between one character's speech and that of the next character to speak.

Poetry should be typed in exactly the way that the poem would appear in a printed version, using single or double spacing and various indentations as the poet wishes.

Organising the pages

Number the pages (or 'folios', as publishers like to call them) straight through from beginning to end. Don't start each chapter at folio 1. If you need to include an extra folio after, say, folio 27, call it folio 27a and write at the foot of folio 27: 'Folio 27a follows'. Then write at the foot of 27a: 'Folio 28 follows'. Obviously, if you want to insert more than one page, you would use '27a', '27b', '27c', and so on. Some writers like to use part of the book's title as well as the folio number: 'Harry 27', for example, but this is not essential.

Create a title page for the book, showing the title and your name or pseudonym. Add your name and address in the bottom right hand corner, and also type it on the last folio of the typescript, in case the first folio becomes detached. You can also add a word count, if you wish (if using the word-counting facility on your word processor, round the figure up or down to the nearest thousand or five thousand). If you want to include a list of your previously published books, a dedication, a quotation, a list of contents or of illustrations, an assertion of your moral rights, or any similar material, use a separate page for each item. Leave these pages unnumbered or use small roman figures – i, ii, iii, etc – so that the first folio to have an Arabic number will be the first page of your text.

When fastening the typescript together, don't use pins (which scratch), paperclips (which pick up other papers from a busy editor's desk), or staples (which make it difficult to read). Don't ever fasten the pages together in one solid lump, and it's best to avoid ring binders too. Don't use plastic folders – they are slippery and can very easily cascade off a pile on the editor's desk (which won't please the editor). Almost all publishers prefer to handle each folio separately, so put the typescript into a wallet-type folder, or more than one if necessary. Put the title of the book and your name and address on the outside of the folder.

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If illustrations form a large part of your book and you expect to provide them yourself they should be included with the typescript, and equally a selection should accompany a synopsis and specimen chapters. Send copies rather than originals. If your book is for children don't complete all the illustrations until the publisher has decided on the size of the book and the number of illustrations. If you have a friend who wants to supply illustrations for your book, do make sure that they will be up to publishing standard before you accept the offer. You may put off a children's publisher by suggesting an illustrator – they like to choose.

Waiting for a decision

Many publishers take what seems to be an unconscionable time to give a verdict on typescripts submitted to them. However, a decision whether or not to publish may not be easy, and several readings and consultations with other departments in the publishing house often have to take place before the editor can be sure of the answer. If you have heard nothing after two months, send a polite letter of enquiry; if you get no response, ask for your typescript back, and try another publisher.

Don't expect to be given reasons for rejection. Publishers do not have time to spend on books and authors which they are not going to publish. However, if the rejection letter

12 Any Street, Any Town,
Any County

Messrs Dickens and Thackeray,
83 Demy Street,
London WC45 9BM

14th March

Dear Sirs,

May I please send you the novel I have written, which I want to get published? It's called Wendy Chiltern. That's the name of the heroine. I am a 76-year-old grandmother, but all my friends say that I am very young for my age and I can certainly claim to be 'with it'. I belong to the Townswomen's Guild, and I do a lot of work at the local Church, and I play Bridge regularly, so you can tell my mind's still as sharp as ever.

I have been writing ever since I was a little girl, without trying to get anything published, but my friends have persuaded me to try my luck with this book. One of them said it was better than anything by Jackie Collins. Any publisher would jump at it, she said. They are all so enthusiastic, that I just had to 'have a go'...

The book is 57 pages long. It is properly typed, and all the spelling mistakes have been corrected. I should tell you that I am aware that the novel has some faults. It is just a little slow to get started, but once you're into it I am sure you won't be able to put it down.

If your reply is favourable, I shall bring the typescript to your office and perhaps you could spare me a few minutes to talk about it.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Hopeless (Mrs)

This letter is far too long, and includes masses of irrelevant information about the author. The fact that the lady's friends said they liked the book is no recommendation – what else are they going to say to their friend? And no editor is going to be tempted by a slow beginning, however honest it may be for the author to point it out. The book is almost certainly typed in single spacing with minuscule margins, and even so will be a long way short of book-length. And publishers do not spend time interviewing would-be authors – the lady should leave the typescript at reception, and let it speak for itself.

contains any compliments on your work, you can take them at face value – publishers tend not to encourage authors unless they mean it.

Copyright material

Copyright exists as soon as you (or anyone else) records anything original to you on paper or film or disk. If you want to quote or otherwise use any material which is someone else's copyright, even if it is a short extract, you will have to get permission to do so, and possibly pay a fee. This applies not only to the text of a book, but also to letters and photographs, the copyright of which belongs to the letter-writer and photographer respectively. You must always give full acknowledgement to the source of the material. Use copyright material without such clearance and acknowledgement, and you are guilty of plagiarism – and another name for plagiarism is stealing. There are some circumstances in which you may use small amounts of text under a rule called 'Fair Dealing'. If your book has been accepted for publication, the publisher will be able to give you advice on the matter. (See also articles on copyright starting on page 0.)

Proofs

When your book is accepted by a publisher you may be asked to do further work on it, and a copy-editor may check the typescript line by line and word by word. As the author you should see the final copy before it goes to the printer, and this is almost your last chance to make any changes, whether they are simply the correction of literals or are more

14 Any Street, Any Town,
Any County

Ms Ann Clarke,
Messrs Dickens and Thackeray,
83 Demy Street,
London WC45 9BM

16th March

Dear Ms Clarke,

May I please send you my novel, *My Son, my Son*, for your kind consideration? It is approximately 87,000 words in length and is a contemporary story, telling of the devastating effect on the marriage of the central characters when their 17-year-old son announces that he is gay. It is aimed at the same market as that of Joanna Trollope, although my characters might be described as a little further down the class scale.

I have written a number of articles which have been published not only in my local newspaper, but in a couple of cases in 'The Lady', and once in 'The Observer'. This is my first work of fiction, but I have two other novels with similar backgrounds in mind.

I enclose a sae and look forward to hearing from you. Perhaps you will let me know whether you would prefer to see a synopsis and specimen chapters, or the entire book.

Yours sincerely,

Lucilla Possible

A good enquiry letter. The writer has (we can presume) found out to whom to address the letter, and how the lady spells her name. The letter is brief, but gives a clear picture of what the novel is about, and suggests its possible market, telling the publisher all that is necessary at this stage. It makes the two points that the writer has had some success with her work (do always include such details, provided that they are for professional publications), and that she intends to write other books. It also asks about the possibility of sending a synopsis and specimen chapters rather than the complete book, and that is in fact the way in which most publishers nowadays like to see new material (especially for non-fiction books, but also for novels). Of course, no enquiry letter, however satisfactory, can guarantee a favourable response, but at least with this one no editorial hackles should rise.

extensive than that. You should be aware that many publishers nowadays do not use copy-editors and rely on the author to provide an error-free typescript.

At a later stage you will be sent proofs from the printer, which you will have to read with great care. Any errors which the printer has made are corrected without charge, but if you alter anything else, the publisher will have to pay for the changes and will be entitled to pass on to you any costs which exceed 10–15% of the cost of composition (i.e. the setting of the book in type). That sounds as though it gives you a lot of leeway, but alterations at proof stage are hugely expensive, so avoid them if you possibly can.

Michael Legat became a full-time writer after a long and successful publishing career. He is the author of a number of highly regarded books on publishing and writing.

See also...

- *Getting started*, page 0
- *Notes from a successful fiction author*, page 0
- *Notes from a successful non-fiction author*, page 0
- *Notes from a successful children's author*, page 0
- *Writing and the children's book market*, page 0
- *Understanding the publishing process*, page 7
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- *The role of a literary agent*, page 0
- *How to get an agent*, page 0
- *Copyright questions*, page 0
- *UK copyright law*, page 0