

The First Things You Need to Know About Finding an Agent, and About Book Publishers Today...

Getting a book published is like any other career. Part of that craft is learning the business of publishing.

Partnering with an agent is like interviewing for a job. You should seek the right match. Presumably, agents have contacts with publishers. However, what are their skill sets? How long have they been in the business? How did they become an agent? Given the challenges of the business, what is their philosophy for managing their client roster? Your goal is to find a partner that will manage your business affairs so that you can write. Learn as much as you can about the agent **before** you have a conversation. The first place to look is at the agency web site.

Most of the agents I know are always looking to add to their portfolio. However, agents need to have an almost instantaneous connection on one or more aspects of your project. Given the number of queries agents receive, and because agents have a business to run, the business decision agents make to move forward on a project needs to be both powerful and committed. Most agents will base their decision primarily on their level of success with other projects in your genre, what they hear from the editors with whom they have regular conversations, the power of your query letter, and their current workload. What follows is meant to provide you with information on what to consider as you move on. The more you know, the further you will go.

PUBLISHING "OPTIONS" This is a generalized list of the different groups in which publishers might be categorized. Options is in quotes for the simple reason that most writers would hope, or would think they would hope for a major commercial publisher to come along and, like winning the lottery, offer an impressive six figure advance for their work. In today's publishing environment, unless you have a six figure "platform" to match (*defined below*), this option is simply unrealistic; even for the most brilliantly conceived books.

1. TRADITIONAL -

Commercial - High profile, owned by multinational corporation. Many imprints, national sales team, multiple marketing and publicity staffers; regular communications to all sales channels. Advances are commensurate with author track record, royalty percentages are usually based on suggested retail price, all other rights negotiable.

Independent - While not on the same scale as a commercial imprint, offers many of the same functions. Less access to all sales channels, due to status as a distributed lines, independent sales team; fewer resources in marketing and publicity. Advances are commensurate with author track record, royalty percentages are based on either suggested retail price or on net receipts, all other rights negotiable.

Boutique - While not on the same level as a Independent imprint, offers many of the same functions, and are indeed themselves independent. Often focused on specific genres. Advances are commensurate with author track record, royalty percentages usually based on net receipts, all other rights negotiable.

Academic - Usually requires either peer or academic review, functions much like a Boutique imprint. Often has dual discount schedules, one that restricts placement in certain sales channels - be sure you are aware of which discount schedule your work will land. Advances are generally within the limited scope of the more restrictive budgets, royalty percentages almost always based on net receipts. Most other rights are negotiable in accordance with university policy.

Understanding Imprints and Distribution Clients - Within publishing houses, there are also two groups that warrant explanation.

Imprints Publishers often are sub-divided into "imprints". Imprints have nuanced approaches to their publishing program. Some imprints are genre focused; some may have business models that are designed to garner distribution into specific distribution channels, some may simply reflect the personal literary tastes of the imprint's publisher.

Distribution Clients are publishing companies that are independently owned, but have distribution agreements with larger publishers, or distribution consortiums. Distributing agreements can give smaller presses both editorial independence and the clout of larger commercial houses.

2. REPUTATION - In addition to aforementioned groups, some publishers warrant other merits...

Literary - Has a reputation for higher editorial quality, more awards and higher profile authors. Looks for academics with commercial platform, or potential.

Institutional - Focused on the library, or educational market. Trade discount terms are not conducive to retail distribution.

Regional - Distribution focused within one or more geographic market areas.

3. SELF PUBLISHING - Note that Ninety-seven percent (97%) of self-published books sell fewer than 100 copies.

First Proceeds Venture- No advance, will pay higher royalty than traditional imprint after their initial investment has been recouped. Author will subsidize editorial, design, marketing

expenditures.

Subsidy - Author pays all costs. Most subsidy self-publishing options call themselves “independent publishers” but they are really nothing more than printers with processes set up to streamline the publishing process including eBook and limited run Print On Demand (POD) formats. Most will claim they offer editorial, design, marketing options, access to distribution channels, but all for a cost. *Caveat Emptor. There is an excellent article at the [Writer’s Beware web site](#)¹ with more detail about self publishing.*

REALITY CHECK Publishing a book is about finding readers who are willing to pay to read your work. Each of the options mentioned above have both varying degrees of access to the distribution channels necessary to make your book available to the widest array of potential consumers, and the marketing and publicity expertise to promote your work. Ultimately, finding the right partnership with a publisher is about working with a team of professionals that will invest both financial resources and their marketing prowess to sell as many copies of your work as they can. However, in today’s marketplace, the concept for your work will generally be judged on the same scale as your “platform”.

PLATFORM DEFINED "Platform" is a mantra that has permeated the psyche and lexicon of today's business world. Given the explosion of social media, marketing, publicity and promotional efforts of products rely on a plethora of outlets, both traditional and online. When an Acquisitions Editor (AE) presents a project to her/his colleagues at an acquisitions meeting, they need to be prepared to explain what will the writer/author be doing to promote their own work? How adept are they at initiating and generating consumer sales? What is their current exposure to the media? Do they already have high profile people in their field who would be willing to provide quotes or endorsements, are they in a position to generate speaking engagements on their own, do they have media connections, do they have any relationships with booksellers that will help to generate industry excitement. Most importantly, what is the writer/author’s level of savvy in virtual self-promotion. Here is a direct quote from one AE.

“The other important thing your proposal should include is your platform. I don't just mean credentials (which we know are very strong) but social media, corporate contacts. Credentials are no longer enough--my publisher/CEO need to be convinced that author/s can move books through the register and directly connect with their audience.”

BEFORE YOU LOOK FOR AN AGENT YOU SHOULD KNOW...



For Fiction, unless you already have a solid track record with quantifiable sales, I recommend that you write the complete, and polish your manuscript. Because the task of the Developmental Editor (DE) has been outsourced, Acquisitions Editors (AE) at most publishing houses are expecting agents to deliver manuscripts that are near “production ready”. DE’s have now become Freelance Editors. A very good resource to learn more about DE’s is the [Editorial Freelancers Association](#)².



For NonFiction, Unless you already have a solid track record with quantifiable sales, I recommend that you have a completely polished proposal. A proposal is a business plan on your project including a description, market analysis, platform and marketing plan, comparative titles and an annotated table of contents. You should also have a least three sample chapters. *For more information go to [nepagencyinc.com](#) and look at the Submissions tab.*

HOW TO SEARCH FOR A LITERARY AGENT I recommend that you never wait for one agent to respond. Until you partner with an agent, you should send out queries. You will increase your chances of getting attention if you follow the submission guidelines outlined on the agency website, but continue to research for an agent that you feel would be a suitable match at the website for the Association of Author’s Representatives, [www.aaronline.org](#), and [Publisher’s Marketplace](#). Another good resource is *JEFF HERMAN'S GUIDE TO BOOK PUBLISHERS, EDITORS, AND LITERARY AGENTS*, available at your local library, or wherever books are sold. One last note: The best resources available to writers that I know of can be found at [Writer’s Beware](#)³. *Writer’s Beware* is hosted by the Science Fiction Writers Association, but has information and resources for all writers regardless of genre.

I wish you every success,

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¹ <http://www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware/vanity/>

² <http://www.the-efa.org/>

³ <http://www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/information-center/>