



Topic
Literature & Language

Subtopic
Writing

How to Publish Your Book

Course Guidebook

Jane Friedman

Publishing Industry Expert and Educator



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Jane Friedman

Publishing Industry Expert
and Educator

Ms. Jane Friedman has worked in the book, magazine, and digital publishing industry since the mid-1990s. From 2001 to 2010, she worked at *Writer's Digest*, ultimately becoming publisher and editorial director of the \$10 million multimedia brand. Most recently,

she led digital media initiatives at *The Virginia Quarterly Review (VQR)*, an award-winning literary journal published by the University of Virginia. She continues to lecture in publishing at the University of Virginia and is a former full-time professor of e-media at the University of Cincinnati. She holds a B.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Evansville and an M.A. in English from Xavier University.

Ms. Friedman specializes in educating authors about the publishing industry to help them make the best long-term decisions for their careers. She has spoken at hundreds of events around the world, including BookExpo America, South by Southwest, the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), and the International Women's Fiction Festival. She also is known for thought-provoking talks on the future of authorship and has given keynote presentations at national writing conferences, including The Muse & The Marketplace, the University of Wisconsin–Madison Writers' Institute, and PubSmart. In 2013, Ms. Friedman was invited to take part in a three-day collaborative experiment at the Frankfurt Book Fair, sponsored by Arizona State University and Intel Corporation, to write a book on the future of reading, writing, and authorship. She was also an invited participant at 2012 LitFlow, an international publishing think-tank event, hosted in Berlin, Germany.

Ms. Friedman's expertise has been featured by such sources as NPR's *Morning Edition*, Nieman Journalism Lab, and PBS. She also has served on literature grant panels for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Creative Work Fund. She is a regular columnist for *Publishers Weekly*, the leading trade

magazine for the publishing industry, and is an adviser to The Alliance of Independent Authors, an international nonprofit professional association for authors. Since 2008, Ms. Friedman has maintained an active blog for writers at JaneFriedman.com, which now enjoys more than 100,000 visits every month and has won multiple awards for its service to the writing community.

Ms. Friedman's feature articles have appeared in *Writer's Digest*, *The Writer's Notebook* (an online publication of AWP), *VQR Online*, *Digital Book World*, *Publishing Perspectives*, *Independent* magazine (published by the Independent Book Publishers Association), *The Huffington Post*, *Writer Unboxed*, and many other print and online venues. Her essays have been published in collections by the University of Chicago Press, Seal Press, Milkweed Editions, and McPherson & Company, as well as *Writer's Digest Books*, *Writer's Market*, *Writer's Market UK*, and *The Australian Writer's Marketplace*.

Ms. Friedman has published two books for writers: *Beginning Writer's Answer Book* and *Publishing 101: A First-Time Author's Guide to Getting Published, Marketing and Promoting Your Book, and Building a Successful Career*. ■

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Disclaimer

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How to Publish Your Book

Scope:

Successfully publishing a book requires a professional approach to the marketplace, with the ability to identify how and where your project fits into the ever-evolving publishing landscape. This course covers the most critical steps to getting a novel or nonfiction book published for a general audience. It also offers an in-depth understanding of how the industry works after you have a book deal, including how to effectively market and promote your work before and after it releases.

In this course, you'll learn to think like an editor or agent, you'll come to understand how a publisher would categorize your work, and you'll discover how to clearly define what type of work you're writing, as well as its commercial potential. Sometimes books are sold on the basis of an idea alone, and sometimes the full manuscript is required. You'll find out what approach is best for your work and what materials to prepare before beginning the submission process. The course will also explain the role of literary agents, including when one is required or preferable and how to tell a good one from a disreputable one.

The number-one tool for getting published, the query letter, is dissected into its five key components, with specific examples of effective queries. The course also analyzes the principles of the novel synopsis, sometimes required in addition to the query, and offers examples of good and bad summarization, plus a key formula to avoid dead-sounding summaries.

For certain types of books, the author must have a platform to the publisher in order get a deal. Because so much confusion surrounds the concept of platform, we'll fully define this term. We'll discuss the various facets of a platform—including online presence, authority and credibility in the market, and ongoing visibility to readers—from a strategic and practical standpoint. You'll also get specific advice on how extensive your platform must be before securing the interest of an agent or publisher.

In addition, the course thoroughly explains the purpose of book proposals, including what questions the proposal must persuasively answer. Although book proposals vary in structure, they have several core elements that require in-depth research; we'll cover these research steps and specific recommended research methods in detail. You'll learn the major proposal sections and elements, as well as the supporting or ancillary materials that can be helpful based on the unique qualities of your proposed book.

We will also look at the challenges of publishing a memoir, including what types of memoirs often fail to gain agent or editor interest and the most common problems in memoirs by new writers.

Before sending a query, proposal, or manuscript, you'll learn how to appropriately format these documents and submit them according to agent and publisher guidelines. We'll define and explain the most common terminology in guidelines for writers. We'll also learn standard communication practices when dealing with agents and editors, as well as if and when to register for copyright in advance of submission. If you're interested in conference pitches with editors or agents, you'll discover how to make the most of such opportunities and analyze examples of weak versus strong pitches.

In the large majority of cases, writers can expect to be rejected multiple times before gaining an acceptance. For this reason, we'll discuss rejection letters and phrases. In cases where no meaningful reason for rejection is offered, you'll learn how to identify potential problems in your manuscript, especially in the opening pages or chapters. Sometimes getting rejected or making little progress can lead to self-doubt, writer's block, and bitterness; we'll also discover how to deal with psychological setbacks in the short term and long term.

In some cases, it can be worthwhile to pay a professional editor to assist in improving a manuscript or proposal. We'll discuss why and when to hire a freelance editorial service, as well as what to expect from the editing process. Alternatively, many informal and formal communities exist to support writers, including writing events and organizations, writing classes and

workshops, and writing critique groups. You'll learn about the best resources available and identify which opportunities best fit your goals or skill level.

For writers fortunate enough to be offered a deal, we'll introduce the three categories of book contracts, as well as the most common terms offered by major publishers. You'll learn about the book publishing process from beginning to end, the keys to working successfully with a publisher, and what to expect of the publisher's editorial, sales, marketing, and publicity teams. You'll also get an overview of traditional and digital marketing and publicity efforts, including the mechanics of getting a book onto a national bestseller list.

Because authors share the responsibility for marketing and promoting their books, we'll cover the long-term strategies associated with strong book marketing and platform building, including how to find and engage a readership, build a strong author website, and be active on social media.

If traditional publishing is no longer an option, you'll discover how and when it's possible to successfully self-publish. The course covers different methods of self-publishing, including full-service providers, print-on-demand providers, and e-book retailers/distributors. You'll learn what questions to ask before signing with any self-publishing service and how to find the right professionals to assist you. Because the self-publishing landscape keeps changing, several core sales and marketing strategies have emerged. We'll explore the qualities common to successful self-published authors today, the role of algorithms and metadata in book discoverability, and the challenges self-published authors face in getting attention for their work.

Finally, you will learn how to think beyond the book, especially as the publishing landscape continues to evolve. The use of tablets, phones, and apps has changed how we access many types of information, and young and emerging writers are writing and publishing in new ways and on new platforms. Throughout the course, we'll consider the future of reading, writing, and publishing—and the changing value of the publisher to the writer. ■

Today's Book Publishing Landscape

Lecture 1

More than 80 percent of people in the United States say they have a book inside them. If you're one of the millions who is writing or thinking about writing a book, the first thing you need to know is that publishing is a business. Publishers and agents look for authors or projects that will make money and provide a good return on investment. In this lecture, we'll first explore this idea of publishing as a business; we'll then take a brief look at the Big Five of publishing and consider the changes affecting the industry today. We'll close by noting some of the challenges authors face—many of which can be overcome with sound knowledge about the industry.

Publishing as a Business

- Although some people like to imagine a long-ago golden era of publishing—a time when selecting and producing the best literature took priority over sales—today's book publishing industry has its roots in Gutenberg-era printers, which were distinctly commercial from the beginning. In the early days of the industry, printers were also publishers and, as such, owned all rights to the work they distributed and sold. Publishers were under no obligation to pay the author—and authors themselves considered it loathsome to write for money.
- One might argue that publishers have remained single-minded in their profit motive since the invention of printing. It's the authors whose business models and attitudes have changed over time. Nevertheless, since the days of Gutenberg, authors have complained about the money-grubbing tendencies of book publishers and booksellers and have had unreasonable expectations about what their publishers can achieve.
- Today, the book publishing industry is once again experiencing monumental shifts, which pose challenging questions for authors.

Despite the many changes in the business, traditional publishing is still an attractive and proven method to reach a broad audience, achieve fame, and become a recognized thought leader. But it's a competitive industry; most estimates put the rejection rate at 99 percent—or higher! As a writer, you should adjust your expectations of the business so that when you are inevitably rejected, you aren't surprised and you know what steps to take next.

- It's also important to realize that there is not a great deal of money to be made in publishing, for either the author or the publisher. As selective as publishers are, they don't market everything they publish, and they have minuscule marketing budgets compared to other consumer products. The lucky few authors who get a publishing deal often realize, after the fact, that their book is just one among thousands of titles released every year, and not many people even know it exists.

Words to the Wise Writer

- Before we discuss the publishing industry, it's worthwhile for you to take an honest look at the reasons you want to become a writer. Don't do it because you've been told by your family and friends that you ought to write a book. You need to write because you're compelled to, because you can't stop yourself from writing, no matter how much anyone tries to discourage you.
- You also need to understand that just as with any other profession, authorship requires years of effort, learning, and practice if it's to become your livelihood. Writing requires commitment.
 - Too many writers rush to submit work before it's ready. They approach publishers or agents with their first book project, sometimes in rough form, and expect to receive feedback and counseling. But that's not how publishing operates.
 - The number-one question to ask yourself before you think about getting published is this: Is this book the best I can make it? Make sure you have put in the work required to produce a publication-ready manuscript.

- The good news in the publishing industry is that you can get agents and editors to consider your work even if they've never heard of you, primarily by following the traditional submission process that we'll discuss in this course.
- Many writers want to know how to increase their odds at getting published, particularly when it comes to capitalizing on current trends in the market. Although we'll discuss trends briefly, your best shot at selling a book to a publisher is to write about what you want to write about and write it as well as you can.

Book Publishing: The Big Picture

- When most people think about book publishing, they envision the *Big Five*—the five New York-based publishers that produce more than two-thirds of all books in the United States. These are Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, the Hachette Book Group, and Macmillan.
- Perhaps the biggest strength of any Big Five publisher is its distribution and reach into the physical retail market. Each of these companies employs a salesforce that focuses on getting retail placement with the biggest possible buy. The challenge for most authors is being able to produce a book that merits this nationwide distribution. Most publishers need to anticipate sales in the tens of thousands of copies to make a project worth their time and investment.
- In part because of consolidation in the industry, the Big Five have been accused of producing homogenous and sometimes even mediocre work. Whether that accusation is fair or not, they are reliably interested in work that demonstrates commercial potential. However, this focus on mass-market, commercial work provides an opening for quality midsize and small publishers to publish in more niche or specialized markets that have been abandoned or neglected by the Big Five.
- Industry estimates put the number of publishing companies in the tens of thousands, but many of those companies don't issue books



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The Big Five engage in what's known as *trade publishing*, that is, publishing books that are stocked in an average bookstore for a general audience.

you'd ordinarily find in a bookstore. Further, with the relative ease of digital publishing, small presses have proliferated. To the average author, it can be difficult to tell what kind of sales and marketing muscle a small press has, but probably one of the biggest indicators is how well distributed the publisher is and whether it invests in a print run of books that is used to fulfill orders placed by stores. Many of the new small presses have little trade publishing experience, avoid investing in print runs, and focus on publishing e-books that are primarily distributed and sold on Amazon.

- Of course, Amazon itself represents a critical transformation taking place in today's publishing landscape. It's now possible for an author or a small press to publish books that are on an even footing with the Big Five because they have equal access to distribution on Amazon, the number-one retailer of books. It's estimated that more than 60 percent of books in the United States are now sold through Amazon across all formats—print, digital, and audio.
- Although the number of published titles was increasing through the 1990s and early 2000s, the title count skyrocketed after the e-book

became a viable consumer format. From traditional publishers, the number of titles produced in 2013 was a little more than 300,000; in the burgeoning self-publishing market, that number was nearly half a million.

- It's important to note that although more books are being published than ever before, book sales have remained more or less flat, and even this stability has only been possible through e-book sales. According to Nielsen data, the U.S. print book market peaked around 2008 to 2009; print book sales have been on a slow decline ever since.

The Profession of Writing Today

- Until the late 1990s, only one viable option existed for 99 percent of authors seeking publication: to gain acceptance from a traditional publisher. But now that you can publish at the click of a button, the challenge is getting attention in a world of “cognitive surplus.” A writer today is competing against thousands more would-be writers than even a couple of decades ago. Thus, respect tends to go to those who earn the attention of readers, not necessarily those who pass muster with the Big Five.
- As a result, publishers have had to focus on PR when they never had to before—and more actively defend their value to authors. There is now a class of successful self-published authors who aggressively speak out against so-called legacy publishers. They portray the Big Five as slow-moving, low-paying, and generally working against authors' interests. But all of this is actually an old story: the ongoing love/hate relationship between author and publisher.
- Something else that has remained consistent is the fact that major publishers can still bank on the ego boost and recognition that most new, unproven authors crave. Even if thousands of authors decided to leave traditional publishing tomorrow, there would be more than enough people to take their place in the system and accept a book deal. Most writers also recognize the need for some type of guidance and expertise from industry professionals.

- What’s happening today in the publishing industry is confusing and divisive. For many decades now, authors have felt underserved and unsupported by their publishers; thus, the freedom and power offered by self-publishing is very potent. Authors have separated into camps: those who defend traditional publishing and those who defend self-publishing. In the face of such divergent voices, it’s not surprising that most authors struggle to understand their choices.
- Our approach in this course will be more measured. As we’ll see, too many authors become paralyzed by change, worried that they’ll make the wrong choice and damage their careers. The reality is that there’s no single publishing path that’s right for everyone. The correct choice depends on your goals and your personality as a writer. And even if you do take a misstep, there’s no mistake from which you can’t recover.
- We’ve already noted that the simple act of publishing—the technical aspect—is not difficult in today’s market. The challenge for an author is how to make his or her book visible and discoverable in the market, then how to create sustained and meaningful word of mouth about it. Even more important, authors must learn that almost no one can expect to “just write” and have a sustainable career. You’ll be far more attractive to a publisher if you’re seen as an active marketer and promoter of your book.
- Above all, if you want to realize monetary gain as an author, you must be willing to treat your art as a business. And these two fields don’t have to be antithetical. In fact, art and business can each inform the other, and successful writers throughout history have proven themselves savvy at making their art pay. Indeed, committed writers succeed in the industry every single day, especially those who adopt a long-term view and those who know how the industry operates.

Suggested Reading

Eckstut and Sterry, *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published*.

Epstein, *Book Business*.

Striphas, *The Late Age of Print*.

Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*.

Exercises

1. Look at *The New York Times* bestseller list and the Amazon Kindle bestseller list. How much overlap is there between the two? What publishers do you find listed? How many are New York based? How many of the books are self-published?
2. Subscribe to *Shelf Awareness*, a free daily e-newsletter for booksellers. Pay attention to the authors, books, and publishers that get coverage and attention.

Defining Your Fiction Genre

Lecture 2

The first step on the path to publication is understanding how a publisher will categorize your work. You should be able to clearly define what type of work you're writing and, even better, have some insight into its commercial viability. This will help set or, perhaps, moderate your expectations of your work's potential and help you better target it in the marketplace. For this reason, over the next two lectures, we'll discuss the genres and categories that represent the majority of books published today. In this lecture, we'll tackle the fiction landscape; then, we'll explore nonfiction.

Commercial versus Literary Fiction

- Fiction publishing can be generally divided into two areas: commercial fiction and everything else. Commercial fiction encompasses well-known genres, such as romance and women's fiction; mystery, crime, and thriller; science fiction and fantasy; and young adult. It also includes what might be generically referred to as mainstream fiction.
- Most people agree that commercial fiction focuses on delivering a great story. There's a clear hero or set of heroes we root for and probably one or more characters who get in the hero's way. The plot has a range of twists and turns, and the story follows a traditional narrative arc.
- This kind of structure has been around for almost as long as humans have told stories, and it's repeated across commercial fiction, with adjustments made to fulfill the requirements or expectations of specific genres. The fact that it uses a formula doesn't mean that such work is boring or derivative but that it builds on proven narrative techniques.
- Work that doesn't fall under the rubric of commercial fiction is often referred to as literary, although there's really no clear

definition of this term. It's perhaps safe to say that those who read and write literary fiction tend to have a more pronounced concern with language. They care not just about the story but about how the story is expressed. Literary fiction may also be more likely to challenge the reader than merely to entertain.

- As the term *commercial fiction* indicates, this type of work is positioned to be a moneymaker. In contrast, literary fiction is fairly notorious for selling in low numbers and not making publishers much of a profit. Literary novels, however, may get widespread readership if the book receives major awards, is well reviewed, or both. Most writers don't choose to write either literary or commercial work; rather, they're simply drawn to produce one or the other.



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Major creative writing programs almost universally value literary work over commercial.

Varieties of Commercial Fiction

- Romance is by far the bestselling genre of commercial fiction. Its sales exceed \$1 billion annually, and it represents between 10 and 15 percent of all fiction read by adults. Romance is read and written predominantly by women. It's often considered one of the easiest ways to break into the business as an author simply because of the volume of titles published and the insatiable demand of the market.
 - Romances are associated with two common conventions: First, a love story must be the focus of the novel, and second, the story must have a happy ending. Outside of those two qualities, romances are diverse, and the genre encompasses dozens of subgenres, such as historical romance, paranormal romance, and romantic suspense.

- There are also two formats in the romance genre: series or category romances and single-title romances. Writers usually have the greatest opportunity to break in with series romances; they then “graduate” to writing single titles if they do well.
- Mystery, crime, and thriller fiction represents the second biggest fiction genre—about half the size of the romance market in terms of revenue.
 - A traditional mystery begins with a death or a crime to be solved; the central character is a detective who ultimately solves the mystery. As with romance, you’ll find many varieties of mystery, such as cozies, police procedurals, and hardboiled.
 - Thrillers tend to deal with a catastrophe that is about to happen, usually something that will affect many people. The hero of the book must find a way to prevent the catastrophe. In many cases, readers know who the villain is, whereas in a mystery, they try to figure it out along with the detective.
 - Thrillers are more likely to be told from multiple points of view, involve a great deal of action, and offer an emotional thrill. Mysteries tend to be more like puzzles to be solved, focus on mental challenges, and are told only from the detective’s or sidekick’s perspective. The distinguishing feature of a suspense novel is that the reader knows about facts or clues that the protagonist does not.
 - As far as market trends go, thrillers are more popular now than traditional mysteries. Cozy mysteries and police procedurals are less popular and generate less enthusiasm from publishers.
- The third largest fiction genre is science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction is difficult to define, but essentially, it’s speculation about future events and tends to be based in scientific fact. Again, there are a number of subgenres of science fiction, including alternate

histories, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, dystopias, and time-travel stories. Within the industry, science fiction tends to get lumped together with fantasy as a genre, and there can be some overlap, but fantasy is distinctive for including elements of the supernatural.

- Of course, a novel set during a recognizable period of history gets the additional label of historical fiction. Historicals often operate on a subgenre level of the major genres. For instance, regency romances are romance novels set specifically during the British regency period. Whether you'll have a challenge selling historical work depends on trends in the main genre in which you're working. The most successful mainstream historical novels that don't work within the conventions of another genre are those in which the author documents the life story of a well-known figure.
- If your book doesn't fit into any of the genres discussed so far, then you may have written what's known as *mainstream fiction* or *general fiction*. In simple terms, a mainstream novel is any book that sells well, whether commercial or literary. Other than that qualification, a mainstream novel tends to address contemporary daily realities.
- Inspirational or religious fiction emphasizes Christian morals or life lessons. In terms of market size, inspirational fiction sits between romance and the mystery-thriller genres. It has similar subgenres to those we've discussed, but the stories have religious or inspirational themes. In most cases, religious fiction focuses on the characters' relationship to God.
- A final important genre is young adult (YA). The one unifying feature of this genre is that it features teenage protagonists. This category is fairly new to the industry and has experienced astronomical growth. The most popular YA subgenres are science fiction and fantasy (more often referred to as paranormal in the YA market) and realistic, that is, stories that address social situations with which teens are concerned.

Sales Considerations for Fiction Writers

- Even if your work combines genres, it's important to identify the primary genre. A work that falls outside of every genre is not a selling point for a publisher. To market a product, publishers must be able to identify its audience and point to comparable work that has been successful.
- Another difficulty you might have in selling your book is related to length. The average novel in today's market is 80,000 words, or somewhere between 200 and 300 published pages. The average for science fiction and fantasy can be longer, perhaps 100,000. But once you get up to 120,000 words or longer, you decrease the chances that an agent or editor will be interested in your work.
- The market for collections of short stories is exceptionally small and tends to be literary only. Most mainstream agents and publishers are willing to consider only novel-length work, but many independent and small presses specialize in publishing and promoting short stories. They are often based outside of New York and offer very little money, but there can be prestige and opportunities in having a well-recognized press take on your collection.
 - There is also the potential to publish what's called a *novel-in-stories*, which is a book-length collection of short stories that are interconnected. This sort of approach is uncommon, but it might slightly increase your chances of finding an interested agent or publisher.
 - The market is even less receptive to collections of poetry than it is to short stories. Still, some small, independent presses are devoted to publishing such collections. If you're lucky, you might interest one, but don't expect to earn much money or to see your book in stores.

The Children's Book Market

- The two major areas of interest to writers in the children's book market are picture books and middle-grade books.

- Picture books are meant for younger children, typically pre-readers or beginning readers. They tell a story through both text and pictures. The traditional picture book is 32 pages and has no more than 1,000 words.
- Middle-grade books are for readers aged 9 to 12 who aren't yet ready for YA novels. They might include a few illustrations, but the story is told solely through the text. Middle-grade books are usually 40 to 80 pages long, or about 30,000 words.
- A third category, less often discussed, comprises easy readers. These are targeted at children who are learning to read on their own. Like picture books, they are very short, usually no more than 2,000 words, with plenty of illustrations.
- The age of the target reader is often critical when pitching children's work because such work should address issues that are appropriate for the children's age and use language that fits their reading level. A common mistake made by the beginning writer is to pitch a children's picture book with a great deal of text on every page; such a book is far more appropriate for an older reader.
- These categories are all related to "leisure reading" for children, or reading that happens outside of school requirements. Writers of such books tend to have considerable leeway in how the stories are told and what vocabulary is used. If you intend to write children's books that will be used as school texts, then you need to study the specific requirements and guidelines of educational publishers.
- Some writers think that because children's work is so short, it must be easier to write and publish. The opposite is probably true. Picture books are among the most difficult to get right. The story must be told in very few words and using a limited vocabulary. Further, the writer must know what children are like today—what situations and difficulties they face in current times—and not write only from childhood memories.

Suggested Reading

Brewer, ed., *2016 Poet's Market*.

Randall, ed. *2016 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*.

Sambuchino, ed., *2016 Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market*.

Sheer, *The Writer's Advantage*.

Exercises

1. Visit Amazon or Goodreads and search for your genre. In addition to the overall genre, you'll find a listing of all the subgenres or themes within it. Which one seems to best fit your work?
2. Run a Google search for your genre or subgenre plus the word *bestseller*. Which bestselling authors appear in the results? What are the most popular and well-known titles?

Categorizing Your Nonfiction Book

Lecture 3

According to industry estimates, nonfiction makes up the large majority of published work in the United States, perhaps as much as 70 percent. That's not surprising if you've studied the composition of a large bookstore lately. Most of the shelf space is devoted to nonfiction categories. As we discussed in the introductory lecture, it can be difficult to generalize about the publishing industry because it's actually many different industries in one. We could say something similar about each nonfiction category. They each have different market considerations and requirements for success. In this lecture, we'll try to get an overview of this market.

Narrative and Prescriptive Nonfiction

- The biggest divide in the nonfiction market is between *narrative nonfiction* and *prescriptive nonfiction*. Narrative nonfiction tells a true story, often using the techniques of fiction; memoirs fall under this category, as do biographies and autobiographies. Prescriptive nonfiction is driven by information and advice; if you're teaching skills or helping readers improve their lives, then you're in the realm of prescriptive nonfiction.
- Because they are driven by information, prescriptive nonfiction books are most often sold on the basis of an author's platform or visibility in the field. You don't have to be a great writer or artist to produce a bestselling prescriptive nonfiction book; rather, the book must deliver on its promise to readers and be based on your established authority. Readers of such books aren't necessarily interested in being entertained or delighting in what a good writer you are; they want to learn from the wisdom of your experience or unique insights.
- The opposite tends to be true for narrative nonfiction. You need some experience or skill as a writer to produce a memoir, history, or other fact-based work that's meant to entertain through storytelling as much as it informs.

- It's difficult to identify a standard length for nonfiction titles. A narrative nonfiction book might average about 80,000 words, while a coffee table book might not reach 10,000 words. Even within specific prescriptive nonfiction categories, you can find books that range from under 30,000 words to those that are more than 100,000.
 - When you're making a business case for an agent or publisher to take on your nonfiction book, you must include an argument for its length, and you must be prepared to be flexible on this point.
 - Some publishers can't afford to publish a book unless it commands a certain price point in the market, which requires having a minimum number of pages to make the price seem appropriate.

Competitive Categories in Prescriptive Nonfiction

- For large retail bookstores, the most important and often competitive categories in prescriptive nonfiction tend to be religion and business, as well as any titles that fall under diet, health, fitness, or self-improvement. Bestselling books in these categories published by the Big Five tend to be driven by high-profile authors who have name recognition, but smaller presses may be satisfied with significant experience or proven expertise in a field.
- The Big Five publishers often have dedicated imprints or divisions for religious or inspirational titles. Religion is actually one of the few areas that have seen strong growth in recent years, and it remains a robust category in both print and digital.
 - One common question writers have is whether they should pitch their work to a Christian imprint or a more general-interest imprint. The basic rule of thumb—and this applies to fiction, too—is that if you intend to quote scripture or if you're in any way proselytizing, then your book belongs at a Christian publishing house.
 - If this nonfiction category interests you, invest in a copy of *The Christian Writer's Market Guide*, which goes into much

more detail than any other resource about the expectations and opportunities in the market.

- Business is another category important enough to merit dedicated imprints or divisions, with more than 11,000 new business books published each year. One expert has identified three main types of business books: (1) self-help business books, such as *The One-Minute Manager*; (2) practical business books, such as those that teach interviewing skills; and (3) Malcolm Gladwell–style books that tell stories supporting a research-based idea.
- For popular categories, such as health, diet, and general advice or self-help, the author usually needs to have credentials or demonstrated success that lends credibility to his or her advice. Successful self-help authors are often TED speakers, multimillionaires, motivational speakers, well-known podcasters, and business founders.
- Not surprisingly, societal trends and current events play a significant role in what types of projects are accepted across a range of nonfiction categories. Most obviously, this directly affects work that falls into the categories of politics and current affairs, but it affects other categories, too. Although it's not usually wise to chase trends, it helps to know when your ideas or projects are in line with, or contrary to, the current zeitgeist line. To find information on current hot topics, read the newspaper or check out Faith Popcorn's *TrendWeek Report*.

Changes in the Nonfiction Market

- A couple of categories in the nonfiction market have experienced significant declines in print sales, affecting what projects publishers will accept. The travel and reference categories have been among the hardest hit. According to Nielsen, travel print book sales have declined 50 percent since 2007, and reference book sales are down by more than a third. The category of crafts, hobbies, and games has also seen a significant decline.



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The decline in reference book sales can be attributed to the availability of free information online; even *Encyclopedia Britannica* is no longer being produced as a print edition.

- At the other end of the spectrum, for some categories, such as gift books, coffee table books, and impulse buys, print or physical retail represents the only or best opportunity. Illustrated or four-color books have not made much of a transition to digital sales because of the complexity of formatting across so many different devices. Sales of these books have also suffered because of the overall decrease in foot traffic at physical bookstores.
- You might think that cookbook sales would have declined given all the free recipes and digital recipe organizers now available online, but this category has shown strength in recent years. However, this growth is driven primarily by celebrity chefs and other well-known personalities.
- Some other difficult categories include personal essay collections and humor. To land a book deal for a collection, it's best to focus on small, independent presses; the same is true for themed anthologies with multiple contributors.

Memoirs

- The memoir category is the one that most aspiring nonfiction writers hope to break into, but most new writers working on a memoir as their first project simply haven't developed sufficient skills to tell their story skillfully. In addition, memoir is one of the few categories of storytelling in which good writing doesn't necessarily score you a deal. You must have something new to say that's not like a million other existing stories.
- If you're intent on writing a memoir, one of the most well-known tricks is to pursue a life experiment or stunt. For example, for her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert went on a trip to three countries to focus on three activities for one month each. Although the stunt memoir isn't a bad idea, it must also have a deeper meaning or insight associated with it.
- To find a fresh angle, you need to figure out why a stranger would care about your story and identify the universal theme. Is it a transformation story, a coming-of-age story, or a cautionary tale? Once you know that, you must be able to sum up the story in one or two sentences, encapsulating the unique perspective of your memoir that hasn't been explored elsewhere.
- Don't expect to sell a memoir that begins in your childhood and ends in the present day. A memoir tells the story of a specific time, a span of months or a few years. Trying to tell your entire life story is a giveaway that you probably don't have a focused or cohesive narrative.
- Trying to fictionalize your life story and pitch it as a "nonfiction novel" isn't a good tactic either. If you're selling your memoir as fiction because the story is salacious or you're afraid of repercussions if people knew it was true, then you're removing a key marketing tactic: Strange or tumultuous events that actually happened make a book more salable. Further, if you have no plans to write fiction in the future, agents and editors will be less

interested in you as an author. They'd rather have someone who plans to grow a brand as a novelist.

- It's common for new writers to come up with a book idea that combines elements of narrative or memoir with elements of advice or self-help. For example, you might want to tell the story of advocating for your disabled child, while giving other parents of disabled children information they might need. These hybrid works can be difficult to sell because they don't firmly land in one category or the other. It's probably smart to identify the primary goal of your work and commit to that angle.

Trends in Nonfiction Publishing

- If you're curious about current trends in a particular nonfiction category, visit a bookstore and study how much real estate is devoted to each category. The more limited the shelf space, the greater the chances that only a small number of titles is being acquired in that category.
 - Before Amazon became the dominant retailer, most bookstores stocked many *backlist titles*. *Backlist* refers to titles that aren't new, while *frontlist* refers to titles released within the last 6 or 12 months.
 - The fact that more people now get backlist titles much cheaper in print or digital from Amazon has decreased demand for such books to appear on store shelves. Therefore, the average store tends to focus on the newest titles and the bestselling titles, as well as backlist titles that demonstrate consistent demand.
- Many nonfiction publishers recognize that they have a problem ahead of them, especially those that produce information or advice that can be easily accessed online or via a different medium, such as video. Two publishers, Simon & Schuster and Rodale, have recently announced initiatives related to prescriptive nonfiction offerings. Both intend to offer paid online courses and subscriptions, seminars and workshops, and even mobile applications to boost the profiles of their authors and find new revenue channels.

- As we'll discuss in a later lecture, it's smart to think beyond the book when it comes to nonfiction publishing. Although narrative nonfiction may follow more in the steps of fiction when it comes to the digital transition, prescriptive nonfiction publishers and authors must now consider the many ways information and advice can be delivered, often in more profitable and immediate forms than a book sitting on the shelf.

Suggested Reading

Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking like Your Editor*.

Exercises

1. Visit Amazon or Goodreads and search for your nonfiction category or genre. In addition to your category, you'll find a listing of all the subcategories or themes within it. Which one seems to best fit your work?
2. Run a Google search for your genre or category plus the word *bestseller*. Which bestselling authors appear in the results? What are the most popular and well-known titles?

Researching Writers' Markets

Lecture 4

Once you feel fairly confident about the genre or category of your work, you're ready to begin researching potential markets for it. The research process described in this lecture assumes that you are based in the United States and are seeking publication in the U.S. market. As we'll see, there are three major categories of markets to research: literary agents, book publishers, and competitions. There are also three basic steps in the process: searching major online databases and market guides, conducting online research to dig deeper into each potential market, and categorizing the markets according to fit. This lecture describes the sources you'll use and the research process in detail.

Premium Databases

- *Writer's Market* is the longest continuously published market listings guide. It includes more than 7,500 listings of markets that pay writers, including book publishers, magazines, literary journals, and contests. It's also released in specialized editions by genre, such as *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market* and *Guide to Literary Agents*. The listings are vetted and updated regularly.
 - If you purchase any print edition of *Writer's Market*, you'll receive access to the continually updated online database for free. Alternatively, you can subscribe online for a monthly or annual fee.
 - Each listing in *Writer's Market* includes the following: basic information about the market, often including its mission statement or publishing philosophy; contact information; types of work accepted and, for publishers, the number of titles published each year; types of submission materials to send and timing of submissions; specific tips for authors; and information about pay rates, contracts or author agreements, and typical terms.

- Publishers Marketplace primarily serves people who work inside the industry. It offers a weekday newsletter, called *Publishers Lunch*, with publishing news and analysis; a job board; and a member database. Most writers are interested in the deals database, which has actively reported and archived publishing deals since 2000.
 - For each book deal listed in the database, you'll find the agent who represented the book, the editor and publisher who bought the book, and the author and tentative title, along with a one-sentence hook describing the work. Each deal is categorized and archived by genre or category, and sometimes, if disclosed, the financial size of the deal is reported, though within broad ranges.
 - You can search the deals database for your book's category or genre to see what recent deals have been made and who the representatives were. If the agent or editor listed in a deal report also has a member page on Publishers Marketplace, you can click on the name and find more information, including his or her history of deals.
 - Note that Publishers Marketplace only catalogs deals that are voluntarily reported by agents and editors, and it's far from a complete listing of every publishing deal. However, it can quickly give you insight into who's buying what and what agents are actively selling.
 - When you run your database search, be careful not to search too far into the past. Although it can be instructive to see the history of sales in a category, so much has changed in the past decade or so that only the more recent years will give you a strong indicator of what's marketable right now.
- If you're open to approaching small publishers, then you might add Duotrope to your research list. It's another paid database service and offers about 5,000 regularly updated markets. One of the distinctions of Duotrope is its extensive listing of non-paying markets that publish shorter works, such as poetry, short stories, and essays. Duotrope also collects user-supplied data on how fast

or slow markets respond, acceptance rates, and which markets have the most submissions reported.

- Aside from these premium services, a number of other websites also keep track of publishing markets. These include AgentQuery.com, a free database of about 900 literary agents; QueryTracker.net, a database of more than 1,000 agents plus publisher listings; and AAR Online, the website of the Association of Authors' Representatives. You should also check out Manuscript Wish List on Twitter, where agents and editors post the type of projects they're seeking but aren't receiving from writers. Follow #MSWL on Twitter or visit mswishlist.com.

Agency and Publisher Websites

- Once you're armed with an agent or publisher hit list, the next step is to undertake a more in-depth investigation of each market you've found. First, visit the websites of targets on your list. Here, you'll find the most up-to-date information on your prospects, including whether they're open for submissions and current submission guidelines.
- For literary agencies, read the descriptions of all the member agents and determine which one is the best bet for your query. Usually, you should approach only one agent per agency, but check the guidelines to be sure. If the agency lists tips for writers, take note of any advice you'll want to remember when you put together your submissions package. If the agency has an active blog or a news page, look there for comments on the types of queries it is receiving, what has sold recently, and what projects the agency is looking for.
- Publisher websites tend to be far more conservative in their information and advice for potential authors; you may even have to do some digging to find submission guidelines.
 - Make sure to study recent releases on publishers' websites. Usually books are released in two seasons—fall and spring. Looking at an entire season together gives you an excellent

idea of the number of titles the publisher handles and the types of authors and topics it works with.

- Study any formal series or imprints of the publisher that specifically apply to your work. For instance, Sourcebooks, an independent publisher in Chicago, has an imprint specifically devoted to YA books called Sourcebooks Fire. Most imprints have specific guidelines and market considerations that are distinct from those of the overall company.
- When you're researching a small press that may be unfamiliar to you, look for indications that it will be a good business partner. Given the ease of publishing and distributing books in digital format, small publishers now abound. Make sure you ask the following questions when researching small publishers or digital-only presses:
 - Where are the books distributed? In other words, are the publisher's books sold to physical bookstores? The largest publishers sell directly to bookstores, while smaller publishers work with specific distributors, such as Ingram or Perseus, to reach stores. Very small presses may sell their books only through online retailers.
 - Does the publisher invest in a print run or use print-on-demand (POD) only? Asking this question is a backdoor method of determining whether the publisher reaches bookstores. It also indicates the level of investment and commitment a publisher may make to selling and marketing your book. Any publisher limited to POD will probably not have your book distributed to bookstores, unless it also invests in a small print run. Ask the publisher what a typical print run is; most publishers will commit to a minimum of 500 or 1,000 copies of any title they publish.
 - For digital-only publishers, what value do they provide that you need? Most digital-only publishers pay higher royalties but little or no advance. Unfortunately, because so much change is taking place in the digital market, standards haven't been established in

this area. You need to study the level of success the publisher's titles seem to have. Ask yourself: Do you want to be part of the family this publisher is building? Do you trust the publisher to be a good editor, marketer, and publicist for your work?

- What's the editing process like, and will you be assigned an editor? Some small presses publish your work exactly as you submit it, without any copyediting or proofreading. Even if you like the idea of your manuscript remaining pristine, this shows a lack of engagement and care. Virtually no manuscript is ready to publish without considerable editorial work.
 - What marketing and promotion do the publisher's titles receive? What is the baseline marketing plan for every title? Find out the bare minimum activities the publisher commits to; if it does little more than make the title available for sale, you should rethink your choice of publisher.
 - How can you terminate the deal? It's less risky to sign with a small press when there's a definitive way for you to leave if things don't work out. Some new presses are willing to agree to a limited term that's renewable by mutual agreement.
 - Finally, can you speak to recent authors? Find out whether other authors are pleased with the publisher's communication and level of involvement. How much value did the publisher add to the process? Will the author stay with this publisher for his or her next book?
- Two final steps to take in conducting online research are to check out the social media of publishers in which you're interested and run a Google search on each specific agent or publisher.

Unconventional Research Methods

- Depending on the type of book you've written and the results of your initial search, you might try a number of other unconventional research methods. For example, one of the oldest recommended

methods of finding an agent is to look in the acknowledgments section of a book you've read that's similar to your own. Another tried-and-true method is to ask friends who have been published for a referral to their agents.

- If you're willing to work with a new agent or publisher, then a well-known trick is to keep a close eye on new market announcements. You can find them reported at Publishers Marketplace, on a blog entitled *Guide to Literary Agents*, and on many online writing communities. Also, every October, *Writer's Digest* magazine publishes a special issue highlighting 20 or more agents who are seeking new clients.
- It can also be worthwhile to look at the virtual shelves of Amazon, as well as the actual shelves of your local bookstore or library, to identify more potential publishers. This kind of search is particularly helpful for nonfiction authors, where the variety of specialized presses often outnumbers the guidebooks' ability to capture them all.
- Finally, you may want to think about partnership opportunities outside the traditional publishing industry, such as with corporations, nonprofit organizations, professional societies, and so on. The key here is to look for market affinities between your work and outside organizations or groups. Are you trying to reach the same audience? If you're willing to accept a nontraditional arrangement, you could end up with a published book that ultimately reaches more readers than one from a conventional publisher.



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For agencies and publishers that are a good fit for your work, find out whether they attend specific conferences or other events; these might give you an opportunity to pitch or meet in person.

Suggested Reading

Brewer, ed., *2016 Writer's Market*.

Herman, *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors and Literary Agents*.

Exercises

1. Make a list of books that are similar to your own and find them in stores, at the library, or online. Note the publishers and see if editors or agents are mentioned on the acknowledgments page. Research both the publishers and the agents and look for their submission guidelines.
2. If you come up with a list of potential publishers outside of the Big Five, visit your local library and bookstore to see if you can find any of their books on the shelves. Ask the librarian or bookseller if you need help.

What to Expect from a Literary Agent

Lecture 5

Of course, the main benefit of having an agent is that it allows you to get your foot in the door of a New York publisher, but there are other advantages, as well. In particular, agents have relationships with editors at many publishing houses, and they're experts in what's selling and how to pitch your work. Further, after your agent has negotiated a deal, he or she will remain closely involved as your book progresses on the path to publication and will run interference with your editor or publisher. An agent may also serve as a career manager, helping you strategize and sell future books, as well as your coach, therapist, cheerleader, and accountant.

Standard and Nonstandard Business Practices

- In the traditional business model, agents make money only when they sell your work. The standard agent commission is 15 percent of everything the author receives, including advances and royalties, and 15 to 20 percent of other possible earnings.
- A small number of agents charge a fee for reading your work, but this isn't routine or a standard practice. Such fees are often indicators of a publishing scam. If you find what appears to be a reputable agent charging a fee, ask whether any critique on the submitted work is offered and whether the fee will be refunded if the agent agrees to represent you and sells your book.
- You might also encounter agents who charge fees associated with submitting your work, such as photocopying or shipping fees. Most agents absorb these expenses as the cost of doing business rather than charging authors, but this practice is not considered unethical.
- You should be skeptical of agents who offer a paid editing service or refer you to an editing service in exchange for representation. Although it's common for agents to suggest revisions of your work before they'll represent you, it's uncommon for them to do this work

themselves and charge you for it or to send you to a specific editor for help. In such cases, the agent may be receiving a kickback for referring you.

- Of course, most agreements between agents and authors are formalized in writing. The author-agent contract spells out the timeframe of the representation, the terms of renewal or termination, the agent's commission, and procedures for dispute resolution.



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Don't respond to advertisements from agents seeking clients, and be skeptical if an agent contacts you unless you've received recent publicity or attention.

- If you sign with an agent, he or she has the right to be your exclusive agent of record, but your relationship should also give you the freedom to represent yourself or market your own work when desirable. In other words, if you negotiate a deal for your own work, the agent shouldn't earn a commission on it.
- For any and all work that the agent sells, he or she is entitled to earn a commission for as long as that contract remains in effect. In fact, the contract you sign with your publisher will include what's known as the *agency clause*, which is written and provided by the literary agent. This clause binds the agent to the book deal as the agent of record; the agent receives all payments and distributes them to the author until the contract terminates. Even if you terminate the relationship, your agent will continue to receive a 15 percent commission while the publishing agreement remains in effect.

Acquiring an Agent

- When an agent offers you representation, don't feel pressured to agree immediately. If your manuscript is actively under consideration by other agents, you should say so, and ask for a

week or two to see if they are interested. You'll also want to ask if the agent requires you to sign a contract, which you'll need time to review. Finally, you'll want a couple of days to go back to your research notes about the agent and formulate a list of questions. If you find yourself in the lucky position of being courted by two or more agents, consider their track records of sales, professionalism, and enthusiasm for your work.

- Note that an agency's size doesn't necessarily correlate with the size of the deal you can expect. Generally, there are several categories of reputable agents: those that consist of only one or two principals, with perhaps a few associates (boutique agencies); midsize and large agencies with many agents and specialized staff members, such as a contracts manager and foreign rights specialist; and mega-agencies that represent other talent besides authors.
- Because it's rare for an agent to represent every single genre, authors who want to pursue multiple genres may need more than one agent. But as a rule, don't shop for more than one agent at a time. Once you've secured your first agent for your first project, he or she will almost always ask what else you're working on. That's your opportunity to discuss your varied areas of interest and your options for representation in another genre.

What to Expect from an Agent

- Finding the right agent doesn't mean that your work will be sent out to publishers immediately. Some agents will help you further refine your manuscript or book proposal, some will ask you for revisions, and others might rework your submissions package to increase its chances of success. Only when the agent is satisfied with the materials and their presentation will he or she start contacting editors.
- Before putting your work out on submission, your agent will probably also discuss the pitch strategy with you, which typically involves a round of submissions to the most desirable editors or, sometimes, an auction.

- Auctions take place when an agent has what he or she thinks is a hot property. The agent might establish a *floor price*—the minimum for which the book will be sold—then make submissions to potential editors, giving a deadline for responses. If one publisher’s bid is topped by another, the first publisher is given the opportunity to top the competitor’s offer. Obviously, this process hinges on one factor: The book must be one that the industry believes will be a big seller.
- Sometimes before the auction starts, a publisher might try a *preempt*, which is making an offer conditioned on the agent immediately taking the project off the market. If the publisher and author are a good match and the offer is good enough, then a preempt can be a satisfying deal for everyone. Preempts often happen when the editor loves the project and doesn’t want to compete with other publishers for it. If the preempt is declined, the agent and author then take their chances with the auction process.
- However the process resolves itself, an agent should never force you to accept a deal or work with a publisher you’re uncomfortable with. It’s not uncommon for authors to turn down better money with one publisher to go with another house or another editor that offers a better fit.
- Unfortunately, having an agent doesn’t guarantee a book deal. If your agent is having a difficult time selling your work, ask for specifics about why. Is the market saturated? Are publishers demanding authors with bigger platforms? Have publishers cut back on the number of titles they’re signing?
 - Agents should specify what imprints or publishers they’ve contacted and been rejected by. You can also ask for the rejection letters, although your agent is under no obligation to provide you with specific contact information of editors and publishers.
 - Don’t assume that your agent isn’t “good enough” if your book didn’t sell. Ask for an open and frank discussion about any

patterns in the rejections you're receiving. Perhaps there's a way to revise your book or its concept to make it more marketable.

- If you feel like your agent is failing you, keep in mind that it may not be easy to find a new one. Just because you've had representation in the past doesn't help you attract it again. And leaving your agency might cause other agents to wonder whether you're a difficult client, especially if they think well of the agency you're leaving.
 - However, if you feel that terminating is your best option, look at your author-agent contract. Some contracts stipulate that you must give the agent at least one year to find a home for the work. Others allow you to terminate the relationship with 30 days' notice.
 - If you part ways with an agent before he or she sells your work, make sure to get a list of all the publishers to which the work was submitted. Unfortunately, if your first agent exhausted every outlet, it's not really possible for another agent to approach those markets a second time. Even if you reconceptualize the book or dramatically revise the manuscript, most editors are unwilling to take a second look at a project they've already considered.
- If the agent path comes to a dead end, another option is to begin the process of submitting your work to smaller presses, niche presses, or digital publishers that the agent didn't pursue because they didn't represent enough of a financial opportunity. If you get an offer from a small press, it's possible to successfully negotiate your own contract if you know what to look for. Alternatively, you can sometimes find an agent to work on an hourly basis to negotiate the contract for you.

Changes in the Agent Model

- In recent years, agents' business models have begun to adapt to self-publishing and digital publishing innovations in the market. Some have started their own digital publishing arms or help their clients self-publish.

- The difficulty here is that traditionally, the only acceptable way for agents to earn money is through sales commissions. The Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR), which is the professional organization for literary agents, prohibits its members from acting as publishers because doing so raises a potential conflict of interest. Therefore, most agents assist with self-publishing only on a commission basis, taking their standard 15 percent on sales.
- Why would an author choose to have an agent assist with self-publishing rather than going solo? Although some authors are well-equipped to be publishing entrepreneurs, others prefer the experience and resources of someone in the industry they trust. In addition, a good agent can help in a strategic manner, providing the same kind of marketing support and insight that a publisher would.
- To be clear, self-publishing through an agent remains an unusual way of working. The overriding goal for most agents, especially for those representing new or unpublished clients, is to sell their authors' work to a traditional publisher. Don't expect to receive an immediate response to your submission with an offer to help you self-publish; that conversation typically takes place only after months of trying the traditional publishing route and by mutual agreement.

Suggested Reading

Sambuchino, ed., *2016 Guide to Literary Agents*.

———. *Get a Literary Agent*.

Exercises

1. Visit the blog entitled "Guide to Literary Agents." Scan recent posts for new agent announcements or Q&As with agents.
2. Visit sites that catalog what agents are currently looking for, such as mswishlist.com, mswlpagraph.wordpress.com, and agentandeditorwishlist.tumblr.com.

Writing Your Query Letter

Lecture 6

The query letter is the time-honored tool for writers seeking publication, used by magazine writers and book authors alike. In book publishing, the query functions as a sales letter that attempts to persuade an editor or agent to read your manuscript. A good query has several distinct elements: some customization or personalization of the letter for its specific recipient; a clear definition of the property being offered, including the title, genre or category, and word count; the hook, which is the real meat of the query; biographical information; and the closing. In this lecture, we'll look at each of these elements in detail as they apply to query letters for novel and memoir manuscripts.

Opening the Query Letter

- Personalizing your query can set your letter apart from the hundreds of other queries sitting on an agent's desk. A surprising number of writers do little or even no research when submitting their work, simply blasting their materials to any address they can find. Of course, editors and agents can easily spot blanket submissions, which are often easy rejections, and appreciate those writers who are more thoughtful and considerate.
- There are several ways to personalize your letter meaningfully. If you study the type of books that an agent or editor represents or publishes, you can compare your work to that of an existing client or author. If you've read that an editor has a specific interest in the type of work you write, you can cite that as a reason for your query. Even better, you might mention hearing an agent or editor speak at a conference. The key here is demonstrating knowledge of the marketplace you're trying to enter.
- Here's an example of a strong personalized lead for a query letter: "In a January interview on the *Writer's Digest* blog, you praised *The Thirteenth Tale* and indicated an interest in literary fiction with

a genre plot. My paranormal romance *Moonlight Dancer* blends a literary style with the romance tradition.” This approach is succinct, knowledgeable, and direct.

- Next in the query, you need to specifically state what you’re offering, including your book’s title, genre or category, and word count—even though all of these may change at a later date. Including this information signals that you have a fully realized project that’s targeted to a particular audience.
- Sometimes, especially if you’re writing mainstream or literary fiction or a work that includes elements from multiple genres, it can be useful to draw comparisons between your book and another title or your style and that of another author. Note, however, that such comparisons should be thoughtful. Comparing yourself to a current *New York Times*–bestselling author can come across as arrogant; it’s better to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of where your book falls within the literary spectrum.

The Story Hook

- At the core of most query letters is the story hook—probably the most difficult element to get right. Many authors are tempted to cram too much detail into the hook, but this can get tiresome to read; the query becomes loaded down with specifics that don’t help sell the story. Instead, you want to boil your story down to just a few compelling elements: the protagonist or main characters and the choices or conflict being faced. Most queries also need to clearly identify the time period and setting, especially if the story is historical.
- Let’s look at an example of a mediocre hook we can turn into something much better. This example is adapted from *The Writer’s Advantage* by Laurie Scheer. Here’s the hook: “Jennifer is a 43-year-old single woman who’s had a successful career in advertising and decides at the last minute that her biological clock is ticking; she wants to have a child.”
 - This hook isn’t interesting or fresh enough to get a manuscript request, but watch what happens if we add another layer:

“Jennifer is a 43-year-old single businesswoman having her first child; at the same time, her 22-year-old niece, Sarah, is also having her first child. Sarah doesn’t see the benefit of having a career and wants only to be supported by a rich husband.”

- The second hook gives us some conflict; we can see that this might be an interesting story if the two women proceed through the experience together.
- Sometimes your story is compelling, but your query simply fails to capture its unique qualities. Figuring out what’s truly special about your story and expressing it in a compelling way is the toughest part of writing the query. To begin a rough draft of your hook, you might try starting with one of the following formulas:
 - The first formula answers these questions: What does your character want? Why does the character want it? What keeps him or her from getting it?
 - The second formula is to state the character’s name with a brief description, describe the conflict faced, and convey the choices to be made.
- A great hook feels natural and easy, as if it was effortless to write, but we all know that conveying a compelling story in just a few words is the test of a great writer. The following is a well-crafted hook describing a novel by Bill Clegg, *Did You Ever Have a Family?*
 - “On the eve of her daughter’s wedding, a mother is devastated when her home goes up in flames after a gas explosion, killing her ex-husband, her boyfriend, and the young couple to be wed—leaving her the sole survivor.”
 - As in this example, strong hooks are almost always specific and evocative, which helps set your story apart from others.
- Some hooks are roughly 100 to 200 words, others are a paragraph, and others are a few short paragraphs; much depends on the genre

and the nature of the story. In describing the characters, you usually need to mention only the protagonist, the romantic interest or sidekick, and the antagonist. And don't get bogged down in minor plot points that don't affect the protagonist's choices or the story outcome. Finally, don't reveal the ending in your hook.

Dos and Don'ts of Bios

- The next part of the query letter is often a brief biographical note, usually about 50 to 100 words. Here, include your specific publication credits, advanced writing degrees, major professional organizations to which you belong, and possibly, major awards or competitions you've won. You should also highlight any intriguing or unusual research that went into your book. Finally, mention your career or profession, particularly if it lends credibility to your skill in writing a believable story.
- Here's an example of a well-done bio, expressing personality but professionalism, by an unpublished children's writer: "I grew up on a remote farm in South Africa, where I learned to speak Zulu and spent my days exploring bushmen caves and imagining a world filled with mythical African creatures. After my undergraduate studies in South Africa, I went on to complete a master's degree at the University of London and now live in the San Francisco Bay

Red Flags Leading to Rejection

- A query that runs longer than one single-spaced page.
- Direct comments on the quality of your work. Your query should show—not tell—the quality of your writing.
- Explanations of how or why you came to write your book, especially if your motivation is so common as to be a cliché.
- A discussion of trends in the market or your work's target audience. You need to sell the story, not the genre.

Area.” The detail offered here directly connects to the work that was being pitched, a story set in South Africa with components of magical realism.

- Be aware that any agent or editor who is interested in your work will Google your name and find your website or blog, whether you mention it in your query or not. If you’re particularly proud of your online presence, you might want to reference it in your query. This presence demonstrates that you’ll likely be a good marketer and promoter of your work.
- For those authors who have previously self-published their work, including that detail in the query presents a minor dilemma. These days, self-publishing doesn’t usually hurt your future chances of traditional publication, but self-publishing credits don’t make you more desirable as an author either.

Closing the Query

- In closing your query, you don’t have to state that you are querying others simultaneously. However, if the manuscript is under consideration by another agent or editor, state that fact if or when someone else requests it.
- Resist the temptation to editorialize in the closing, proclaiming how much the agent will love the work, how exciting it is, or that it’s a sure bestseller.
- Be sure to thank the agent or editor, but don’t carry on unnecessarily.
- Never introduce the idea of an in-person meeting. The only possible exception to this rule is if you know you’ll hear your recipient speak at an upcoming event. You can mention that you look forward to hearing the speech, but use the event’s official channels to set up an appointment.

Final Thoughts on Queries

- The first paragraph of your query should highlight your strongest selling point. If your personalization is weak, you might start by mentioning a referral from another author or referring to a previous meeting you had with the agent or editor. If your hook is particularly compelling, you might also start with that.
- Once your query letter is final, send it out in batches of five or six at a time. Later, you may tweak the letter and send out another wave. If you're targeting the right people and your query is done well, you should receive at least one or two requests for the material after each wave. If you're getting no responses or form responses, reevaluate your query letter to see if you can improve it.
- Submission guidelines may allow for either e-mail or snail-mail queries. E-mail queries can lead to faster response times, but they may also be easier to delete or reject. An e-mail query may have to get to the point even more quickly than a paper-based query. Make sure your e-mail can be read in a glance or two, without scrolling.
- If an agent or editor is receptive to your query, you may be asked to send a few chapters or the full manuscript. A request for an exclusive means the agent or editor wants to be the only one considering the manuscript, and you must promise not to send the work out to anyone else during the exclusivity period. If you receive a manuscript request, ask when you should expect a response, then follow up within a week of that date.
- Finally, if you don't get a response at all from an initial query letter, follow up two to four weeks after the stated response time in the submission guidelines. If no response time is given, wait a couple of months. If you queried via snail mail, include another copy of the query in your follow-up. If you still don't hear back after one follow-up attempt, it's best to assume rejection and move on.

Suggested Reading

Burt-Thomas, *The Writer's Digest Guide to Query Letters*.

Lukeman, *How to Write a Great Query Letter*.

Exercises

1. Write three different versions of your hook—one at 50 words, one at 100 words, and another at 150 words. Test them out on writing group members, colleagues with some distance from your work, or people who are known for offering the truth. See which hooks gets the most favorable response.
2. Once you have a draft of your query letter, ask a friend who doesn't know anything about your book to read it. Without offering any additional explanation or background for the book, ask what questions your friend has after reading the query.

Writing Your Novel or Memoir Synopsis

Lecture 7

Now that we've tackled the query, we come to what may be the single most despised document you might be asked to prepare: the *synopsis*. A synopsis conveys a book's entire narrative arc and reveals the ending. Unfortunately, there is no standard format or method for writing a synopsis. In this lecture, we'll focus on writing a one-page synopsis that you can use as your default unless specific submission guidelines ask for something longer. Most agents or editors won't be interested in a synopsis that's longer than a few double-spaced pages. In theory, this should make writing the synopsis easier, but as many writers know, boiling down an 80,000-word story into 300 words presents a unique challenge.

Overview of the Synopsis

- For agents and editors, a synopsis helps determine whether or not you can successfully put together a story, especially within the conventions of your chosen genre. A synopsis shows whether your characters' actions and motivations are realistic and make sense.
 - A synopsis can also reveal any problems in your story. For instance, if it turns out that the whole book is a dream or if an act of God resolves the plot, an agent may skip reading the manuscript altogether. A synopsis has an uncanny way of highlighting plot flaws, gaps in character motivation, or a lack of story structure.
 - On the more positive side, a synopsis can reveal the freshness of your story. It also gives you an opportunity to impress an agent or editor with your use of language. Make sure to use active voice rather than passive and the third-person present tense.
- A synopsis must accomplish three things: First, it should tell the story of characters that readers will care about. Generally, the synopsis is written with the protagonist as the focus and shows what's at stake for that character. Second, the synopsis must give a clear idea of the

core conflict for the protagonist, what drives the conflict, and how the protagonist succeeds or fails in dealing with it. Third, the synopsis must explain how the conflict is resolved and how the protagonist's situation has changed, both internally and externally.

- Covering these three topics won't leave you much space for detail. You won't be able to mention all the characters or events. You can't summarize each scene or even every chapter, and some aspects of your story will have to be broadly generalized to avoid detailing a series of events or interactions that don't materially affect the story's outcome.
- Don't make the mistake of thinking that the synopsis merely details the plot; if you do, you'll end up with a mechanical account of your story that doesn't offer any depth or texture—a story without emotion. You need to share both the context and the characters' feelings about what's happening in the story. But again, in writing your synopsis, avoid editorializing the narrative.

What Belongs in a Synopsis?

- As you think about what belongs in the synopsis, consider the most important narrative devices that every story uses.
 - First, the story starts with an inciting incident. This incident often puts the protagonist in a situation that increases tension and conflict, forcing him or her to act. Or the protagonist wants something badly but faces an obstacle to acquiring it.
 - Not long after, the story hits the first major turning point, the point at which the character embarks on a journey without any possibility of return to the status quo.
 - Conflict and tension build until the story reaches a climax, which usually happens about three-fourths of the way into the book. The climax is the moment that determines whether or not the protagonist succeeds or fails or when the primary story tension is brought to its crisis point. Portraying this moment effectively is usually critical to a synopsis, as is the inciting incident.

- As your character deals with the story conflict leading to the climax, he or she will undergo some kind of emotional journey. Your synopsis should clearly indicate what pressures the character is under and his or her approach to dealing with the conflict.
- Finally, you'll show the falling action and reveal the ending.
- To decide what characters deserve space in the synopsis, you need to look at their role in assisting or generating conflict for the protagonist. We need to see how they enter the story, the quality of their relationship to the protagonist, and how they might change, too.
 - For example, *Gone with the Wind* has a key romantic interest, Rhett Butler, and his actions or reactions are just as important as those of Scarlett O'Hara. In stories with a scheming villain, we need to know his or her motivations, as well. A good rule of thumb is to limit yourself to mentioning three or four characters by name in the synopsis, but of course, only you can determine the right number, based on the qualities of your story.
 - Don't let your synopsis get bogged down with the specifics of character names. Use the names of your main characters, but if a waitress enters the story only briefly, call her "the waitress." It's common to type character names in all capitals when they are introduced so that agents or editors can see who the key figures are at a glance.
- The synopsis doesn't necessarily have to tell your story in chronological order; it's more important to make sure that someone unfamiliar with the story can easily understand the sequence of events. The art of the synopsis comes in figuring out how to weave together all the story elements in such a way that everything feels natural. However, you also have to make sure that the synopsis structure matches the structure expected in your genre. A synopsis of a romance should deliver an unfolding love story. A mystery must become more tense and thrilling as it approaches its climax.

What Doesn't Belong in a Synopsis?

- Don't spend any time in the synopsis explicitly explaining or deconstructing the themes your story may address. You don't want to make your book seem like a morality tale.
- Spend only the briefest amount of time on character backstory. A phrase or two is plenty to indicate a character's background, and you should reference it only when it affects how events unfold.
- Avoid including dialogue, and if you do, be sparing. Make sure any dialogue you include is absolutely iconic of the character or represents a linchpin moment in the book.
- Don't ask rhetorical questions or leave questions unanswered. Remember, your goal here isn't to entice a reader.
- Don't split your synopsis into sections or label the plot points. In rare cases, such as a novel with a unique narrative structure, there



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A smart strategy for organizing a synopsis is to outline the critical events in your story, which you should be able to jot down without going back to your manuscript.

might be a reason to have subheads in the synopsis, but try to avoid sectioning out the story in any way or listing a cast of characters up front, as if you were writing a play.

- Although your synopsis will reflect your ability to write, it's not the place to get pretty with prose. Leave out any lyrical descriptions or attempts to impress through poetry. In a synopsis, you don't have space to follow the advice "show, don't tell"; you have to tell. For example, it's acceptable to state that your main character is a "hopeless romantic" rather than trying to show it.
- Finally, your synopsis shouldn't be coy or mysterious in any way. The agent needs to know what happens in your book and how it delivers to evaluate whether or not it has money-making potential. Without a clear and accurate synopsis, professionals can't make an informed decision about your project.

Reviewing Your Synopsis

- Once you have a first draft of the synopsis, set it aside for a week or so, then return to it. Do your characters come to life and seem interesting? Does the plot effectively build tension? Does the reader clearly understand what's changed for the protagonist by the end? Does the overall tone or style of the synopsis match that of your novel?
- If you start to get a bad feeling from your synopsis, it may be time to pause the submission process and considering revising your work. Problems with your manuscript won't get resolved by the agent or publisher; instead, you'll get rejected. Because you get only one chance to pitch each work, make sure you resolve any problems that surface during the synopsis-writing stage.

Before-and-After Synopsis Samples

Before: The following synopsis introduces us to too many characters upfront, making it difficult for the reader to keep track of who's who. (Synopsis provided by Daniel Crane.)

NELL HATLEY, a young law professor in her tenure year at the fictional Coppersmith University near Cincinnati, comes late to a faculty meeting, where she finds a law student, MARY REYNOLDS, opening fire. Nell subdues Mary, but is knocked unconscious. DETECTIVE ALAN SMITH visits Nell in the hospital and reveals that one of her colleagues, LARRY MCINTOSH, was killed and another, HARDEN GHENT, was seriously wounded. In Mary's pocket, the police find a note with McIntosh, Ghent and Nell's names.

After: The revised synopsis provides a little more characterization of Nell and focuses on her story. The reader learns about the inciting incident and keeps the twist of the three names scribbled on a note but holds back information on the other victims in the opening paragraph.

NELL HATLEY is a young and ambitious law professor in her tenure year at Coppersmith University near Cincinnati, struggling with insecurities about the strength of her scholarship. When she arrives late to a faculty meeting, she finds a law student opening fire. Nell subdues the shooter, but one of her colleagues is killed and another is seriously wounded. In the shooter's pocket, the police find a note with three names scribbled on it—the two victims and Nell's.

Before: In a memoir written by an Indo-American immigrant, the synopsis initially provides too much backstory for what is essentially a straightforward conflict: The protagonist wants something different for herself from what her parents wanted.

The story opens in the early 1980s, a time in which Indian immigrants were assimilating into American culture in a way

Before-and-After Synopsis Samples (*continued*)

that I call “being brown.” I was tolerated in my small town but not accepted. The Asian culture I inherited emphasized hard work and success at all costs, and early tastes of my family’s financial success reinforced that the only way to rise above my own alienation was to make money—a lot more than everyone else. However, the path I truly felt called to take, to write, offered absolutely no such promise. There was not one Indian writer on the bookshelves, not an ethnic face on television, and never a non-American name in the newspaper bylines. To aspire to something outside of medicine, engineering or economics seemed equivalent to declaring one’s life a failure.

After: The revision conveys the conflict more quickly, personally, and originally.

My physician father hammered his values into me with the conviction that they would lead to wealth and lift me above our alienating immigrant experience. However, I had a deeply spiritual experience at an early age that led me to question my father—and my entire upbringing. Thus began my battle between the pursuit of money and the pursuit of life.

Before: In a complex story involving three storylines, three main characters, and three locations, the synopsis devotes too much space to introducing only one character. (Synopsis provided by Kacie Stetson.)

DAKOTA BROWN, the madam of the notorious black brothel, the Black Orchid, finds an abandoned white baby girl in a gas station restroom. She takes the girl back to the brothel, where her best girl, HERMIONE JONES, takes the child for her own. They name her BRICK for fortitude. For years, they hide her away from the prying gaze of customers. Brick loves Hermione fiercely and descends into abject panic whenever Hermione leaves her side. When Brick is twelve, a john murders Hermione, flinging Brick into the depths of despair. She retreats to the kitchen and teaches herself to cook, a skill for which she shows a mystical talent. When

Before-and-After Synopsis Samples (*continued*)

she hits puberty, Dakota enrolls her in the Culinary Academy in the hopes of keeping her away from lustful customers. There, Brick meets HECTOR, a Mexican student who falls in love with her. His advances are met with icy rejection, which only fuel his fire. One night, after months of spurned love, he gets drunk, follows Brick on the way home, and attacks her sexually. Hector gets thrown in jail as Brick plunges into suicidal depression.

After: The revision sums up the character's background quickly to allow space to describe how the story unfolds. Note the use of a dateline to help the reader understand how the story will come together over a period of many years.

Los Angeles, 1963. An orphan girl, BRICK grows up in a notorious brothel, the Black Orchid. At an early age, she teaches herself to cook, a skill for which she shows a mystical talent. A Mexican student, HECTOR, falls in love with her; when his feelings go unrequited, he sexually assaults her. Brick plunges into suicidal depression.

Suggested Reading

Camenson and Cook, *Your Novel Proposal from Creation to Contract*.

Lyon, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*.

Exercises

1. Once you have a draft of your synopsis, highlight every adjective or adverb. Can you eliminate them by choosing a stronger noun or verb?
2. Highlight every character name in your synopsis. Does each character deserve to be specifically mentioned or included? Is he or she critical to how the narrative unfolds? Why?

The Importance of Author Platform

Lecture 8

During the 1990s, as consolidation swept the publishing industry, agents began to say that they couldn't sell a nonfiction book unless the author had a *platform*. At the time, that meant an author who was in the public eye or had some authority. Today, the concept of platform generally refers to an author's visibility and reach to a target audience. In other words, your platform addresses such questions as: Who is aware of your work, where does it regularly appear, who do you influence, and how many people see it? In this lecture, we'll look at platform requirements for nonfiction and other authors and explore the role that platform plays more broadly in a writer's career.

Platform Requirements for Nonfiction Writers

- With a nonfiction manuscript, it can be difficult to get a deal with a New York publisher unless you have a strong platform. A primary consideration is the context of your visibility and reach. For instance, if you're a marketing executive who has excellent visibility and reach to other marketers, but your book is a self-help guide targeted to housewives, your platform doesn't have the best fit for the book you want to publish. Ideally, you should be visible to the most receptive or appropriate audience for the work you're trying to sell.
- Depending on the category, your authority or credibility in your field is also an important component of your platform. Your authority tends to be critical for books on health, diet, self-help, business, and other categories where readers seek advice from experienced and trusted sources. In other words, avoid differentiating yourself by claiming that your book on a specialized topic is a guide by an outsider—an average person who has dealt with a particular problem. The average person's perspective is almost never a selling point.

- As you take stock of your platform as a nonfiction author, evaluate your strengths in the following areas:
 - Publishing or distributing quality work in media outlets with which you want to be identified and that your target audience reads.
 - Producing a body of work on your own turf that gathers followers, such as a website and blog, e-mail newsletter, podcast, or video series.
 - Being active and visible on social media.
 - Speaking at events that your target audience or community attends.
 - Partnering with peers or influencers to produce creative projects or extend your visibility.
- If you're worried that your platform isn't sufficient to merit a New York publishing deal, then you should spend time building it before you pitch. A great platform won't happen overnight, and for some authors, it can take years of effort.
 - Broadly speaking, publishers won't be impressed unless they see a professional and established website, multiple forms of outreach (blogging, e-mail, or social media), and solid recognition in your community. There should be a perceptible ripple effect whenever you write a new column, post on social media, or are otherwise visibly active. If you speak and nothing happens, your platform probably isn't sufficient.
 - For authors seeking specific numbers that would be impressive to a publisher, consider these: It usually takes a website or blog audience of at least 50,000 visits per month to even spark the interest of an agent. A meaningful e-mail newsletter list should have thousands of names. And your social media reach probably needs to be in the thousands, as well.

- That said, engagement matters more than numbers. If you can show that the people you reach are responding and sharing your message, that can carry as much weight as a large audience.
- Memoirists and other writers working on narrative nonfiction may be off the hook when it comes to platform. With narratives, the focus tends to be more on the art and craft of storytelling—or the quality of the writing—more than on the platform. Thus, much depends on your credibility as a good writer; an existing track record of newspaper or magazine publication can often be sufficient to get a book deal. To help overcome the platform hurdle, it also helps to have a timely narrative that taps into hot topics.
- Don't despair if your platform is small or nonexistent. You may simply need to reconsider what type of publisher is a good fit for your book. Small presses, especially university presses, have more interest in the quality of your work than your platform.

Blogging for Nonfiction Authors

- Blog-to-book deals have been a trend for some time, but there are several factors to consider before you decide whether that's the right path for you.
- First, blog writing is not the same as book writing. Blog posts should be optimized for online reading. That means being aware of keywords and search engine optimization and understanding how to include meaningful visual and interactive content. Further, blogging isn't a lesser form of writing to be used as a stepping stone to a book deal; it should be treated as an art form in itself.
- Second, long, text-driven narratives don't often lend themselves to the blog format. In addition, personal stories and essays online are a dime a dozen. You typically must put out a high volume of work to break through the noise or have an incredibly unique angle that catches fire.

- Finally, an effective blog is as much about being active within a community as it is about publishing your writing. Good bloggers network and comment on other blogs that share similar topics or themes.
- A genuine interest in blogging is the best reason for any writer to blog. If you don't see the book deal as the end of the road for your blog, then you're in a better position to do it successfully. Blogging should be approached as a long-term platform-building tool rather than a deal maker.

Platform Requirements for Other Writers

- There is significant disagreement about how much time a fiction writer should devote to writing versus platform building. In many cases, novelists are advised to build a platform as if they were nonfiction authors, but that's difficult for writers who don't have any books or credits to their name. For fiction writers, the platform should grow out of the body of their work. Platform building certainly matters for fiction writers, but it's probably not worth spending much time on until you are on the verge of publication.
- That's not to say that platform never plays a role in what fiction gets published.
 - For instance, if you have a M.F.A. in creative writing from Iowa or Columbia, you've already been selected by one of the most competitive degree programs in the United States. Agents and editors are more likely to extend you time and consideration because you've already jumped a difficult hurdle. Getting a credit in a top-tier publication can also ease the path to a book deal.
 - Similarly, if you've been actively writing and contributing to a community site, such as Wattpad, and you've amassed a strong following, a publisher may see a built-in audience for your work.

The Role of Platform in a Writer's Career

- As we said, platform is about your visibility and reach to your target audience or readership. It isn't about self-promotion or hard selling. In addition, platform building is not a one-time event that happens overnight. It is an organic process of gaining visibility, then developing the readership for your work. For all these reasons, building platform is more about putting in consistent effort over the course of a career and making incremental improvements in how you reach readers and extend your network.



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- Because platform building is an organic process, it will grow differently for every author, but in general, platform has six components:
 - Your writing or content that's publicly available, including all of your traditionally published work, self-published work, and online writing.
 - Your social media presence, including the mainstream sites (Twitter, Facebook), as well as online communities and message boards where you're active.
 - Your website; this is usually critical for any ongoing platform activity because it acts as the hub for all your efforts.
 - Your relationships, including the people you know personally, as well as devoted readers.

People who hold highly recognized positions, have powerful networks or friends, or are associated with influential communities have an easier time building platform than others.

- Your influence, that is, your ability to get people you don't know to help you out or pay attention to you.
- Your reach—the number of people you can reliably broadcast a message to at any given time.
- In platform building, it's important to remember that you are communicating directly with readers. Be consistent with your voice and style; don't adopt a "marketing voice" that's different from your real voice. Also, focus on what's satisfying and engaging. Publish, post, and share things that fascinate or puzzle you, or ask questions for others to answer.
- The people you reach, either online or off, will be at different stages of commitment to you and your work. For this reason, your communication should be segmented by audience as much as possible. In particular, two types of readers deserve special attention: people who are new to your work and true fans who would buy anything you published. For the first group, offer something for free, such as the first book in a series or a special digital download. For the second, consider providing exclusive communications and experiences, such as early access to new work.
- One final aspect of platform building involves the practice of *literary citizenship*, that is, engaging in activities that support reading, writing, and publishing. This could mean posting about favorite books you've read, interviewing other authors, attending readings, and otherwise making yourself visible as an active writer and reader in the community. These activities demonstrate that you're serious about growing your professional network and potential readership.

Suggested Reading

Jelen and McCallister, *Build Your Author Platform*.

Katz, *Get Known before the Book Deal*.

Sambuchino, *Create Your Writer Platform*.

Exercises

1. List all the institutions or businesses you have affiliations with that also have something in common with the book you want to write and publish. How many people do these organizations reach, whether through their internal publications, external outreach, or online presence? What opportunities are available for regular contributors, columnists, or guests?
2. Brainstorm a list of people you know—either personally or by reputation—who are influencers or gatekeepers to the audience for your book. What specific steps or actions could you take to develop relationships with some of these people?

Researching and Planning Your Book Proposal

Lecture 9

A book proposal is essentially a business plan that persuades a publisher to invest in your book. Instead of writing the entire book, then trying to interest an editor or agent—which is how it works with novels—you write the proposal first. If a publisher is convinced by your argument, it will then pay you to write the book. Many authors find that drafting a rough proposal before writing a book has a number of advantages. Primarily, the proposal requires you to do market research, which offers insight into the content your book should include to be competitive on the shelf. However, book proposals are complex documents; in this lecture, we'll dissect the book proposal in detail.

A Business Plan for Your Book

- As we've said, there are many types of nonfiction, and each category has different market considerations.
 - A sizable platform and expertise is typically required to sell a nonfiction book to a major publisher, especially for such categories as health, self-help, or parenting. For narrative nonfiction and memoir, the quality of the writing generally holds more weight than the business case outlined in a proposal.
 - Because each nonfiction category has its own set of market considerations, not all agents or publishers require you to send a book proposal, and some may want a completed manuscript instead. Read the submission guidelines to learn what your target markets prefer to receive.
- If you're unsure about how much your proposal will matter to a publisher, ask yourself this question: Does your book need to succeed based on its literary merit or its ability to entertain or tell a story? In the second case, the manuscript itself must prove your strength as a writer, and the proposal is likely of less importance. However, if your book is focused on sharing information, you're

selling it based on the marketability of your expertise, your platform, and your concept, and your proposal holds incredible weight.

- Proposals vary in length, content, approach, and presentation. Each book requires a unique argument for its existence—or a specific business case—and, thus, requires a unique proposal. However, all book proposals must answer three strategic marketing questions: So what? Who cares? Who are you?
 - The answer to the first question is essentially the reason for your book’s existence—the unique selling proposition that sets your book apart from others in the market.
 - The answer to the second question describes your target readership and the size of your audience.
 - The answer to the third question addresses your authority or credentials to write the book and the existence of an appropriate platform that makes you visible to the target audience.
- In preparing a book proposal, keep in mind that editors who work at commercial publishers care about two things: a viable idea with a clear market, paired with a writer who has credibility and marketing savvy. Knowing your audience or market and having direct and specific ways to reach it gives you a much better chance of success. Pitch only the book you know has a firm spot in the marketplace. Don’t pitch a book with the expectation that the publisher will bring the audience to you.

Researching the Market

- Before you write your proposal, you need to lay the proper groundwork by researching the market for your work. We can break this research process down into five steps.
- First, identify competing titles. Visit bookstores in your area and study other titles on the shelves where you would expect your book to appear. In addition to recording the titles, authors, and publishers of these books, pay attention to price, length, and format. Read the



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In researching your book proposal, talk to a librarian to learn which books are popular based on patron demand.

back cover copy: How is the book being positioned? Who does the book seem to target? What promises are made to the reader, or what problems are addressed?

- Also study the authors' credentials. How are the authors visible in the market? How do they reach readers? Take note of any forewords, introductions, blurbs, or reviews by important people—these might indicate credibility that you'll need, too.
- Once you've finished studying how the book is positioned and packaged, turn to the copyright page to see how many times it has been reprinted. You can also tell that a book is popular if multiple copies are available for sale.
- Study the table of contents to get a sense of each book's scope and quality. You don't have to read all the competing titles from beginning to end, but read enough to understand the voice and style of a few authors.
- Once you've finished the bricks-and-mortar retailer search, go through the same steps with online retailers, especially Amazon.

Make sure you look for e-books, self-published titles, and books published by smaller presses that may not show up in stores.

- This search should yield a list of 20 or more titles that would be comparable or directly competitive to your book. Finding no comparable titles is not necessarily a good thing. It may mean that your idea is too bizarre to have a market, or maybe the market for your work isn't driven by retail booksellers. Either way, finding no competitive titles—or just a handful of titles—may rule out pitching your book to agents and large commercial publishers unless you have another way to prove there's a market for your work.
- The next step is to research the non-book landscape, particularly digital content and online experts who target the same audience as you do.
 - Start by looking for top websites and blogs. Run a general search for keywords and phrases that relate to your book. What will your potential readers find if they turn to Google first? Determine how easy it is to find online information on your topic, whether that information is trustworthy, and whether it's free.
 - Video and audio content are additional competitors to books. YouTube is the second most popular search engine in the world after Google, making video an important medium for instructional categories.
 - You should also search app storefronts to find relevant mobile and tablet applications, as well as online educational offerings. Basically, you should look at anything that might offer help, education, or resources to your target audience. The goal here is to understand how your audience might fulfill its needs for information from online and multimedia sources, as well as from books, magazines, and events.
- The third step in the research process is to study the authors, experts, and influencers you've discovered. Just as you studied the

books and media, dig deeper into the platform and reach of these people to determine how you will set yourself apart. Create a set of notes for each author or influencer you find that includes the following information:

- Keywords or phrases that seem to be strongly affiliated with the author’s brand or presence.
 - Target audience and similarities to your target audience.
 - Published books.
 - Other media outlets used, such as podcasts or video series.
 - Speaking engagements.
 - Social media presence.
- The fourth step is to finely pinpoint your primary target audience. From the beginning, you may have already understood exactly who your book is for. If not, the first three research steps will give you strong indicators about your target audience.
 - It’s a red flag if your proposal claims that your book is for “everyone.” Maybe it could interest everyone, but there is a specific audience that will be the most likely to buy your book. Who are those people, and how and where can you reach them?
 - The more you know about your primary target market, the better you’ll be able to build a proposal that speaks to why anyone cares about what you’re writing.
 - The final step in the process is to analyze how you currently reach your target readers through your platform. The marketing and promotion plan that’s included in your proposal is directly informed by your platform. The best marketing campaigns begin with what you have in place today, not what you hope will happen in the future. You need to be honest with yourself about your

current position in the market and how you'll collaborate with your publisher on marketing and publicity efforts.

Common Proposal Pitfalls

- The most common pitfall found in book proposals is twofold: no clearly defined market, usually combined with a concept that is too general or broad. Your proposal must show why your idea isn't like a million others. Too many proposed books don't have any compelling element that would set them apart from the competition.
 - Sometimes, a marketable book idea doesn't sell because the proposal concentrates only on the content of the book. Of course, the book's topic is important to the author, but the proposal must show why it's important to an audience. The proposal is just as much about the book's benefit and appeal to the target market as it is about the content.
 - If you're having a difficult time figuring out what makes your work salable, consider whether it's the first to do something specific—tackle a particular problem, reveal new information, or tell a specific story.
- Another common problem is that too often, writers try to base a book on their own amateur experience of overcoming a problem or investigating a complex issue. This is usually a surefire way to get your proposal rejected, unless you already have a platform or established audience.
- Other reasons your proposal might be rejected include the following: (1) The market is seen as too small for the proposed book (your defined target audience may be too narrow); (2) you don't have sufficient platform to support sales; or (3) the market for books on your topic is dwindling.
 - If you receive the third response, think about whether or not a book is the best medium for your idea. Some editors and agents might recommend that you begin your project as a blog or a website. Too many authors build their book concepts in

a vacuum without any thought to the online conversations already happening.

- In today’s nonfiction market, agents and editors want to see that your book is not the beginning or the end of the road—that it is merely one aspect of your much larger purpose and strategy for developing content and serving a readership, online and off.
- If the market for books on your topic is dwindling, keep in mind that when executed well, non-book formats can sometimes lead to more opportunity and income than a book itself. Online courses, multimedia companions, and customized experiences tend to command a higher price than books and represent the biggest growth areas for nonfiction authors and experts.

Suggested Reading

Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking like Your Editor*.

Exercises

1. Craft a persuasive 150-word statement that answers the three questions: So what? Who cares? Who are you?
2. Brainstorm 5 to 10 ways to complete this sentence for your project: “My book will be the first to” or “This is the only book to”

Writing an Effective Book Proposal

Lecture 10

Once you've completed your market research, you're ready to begin writing the book proposal. Even though every proposal is different, they all have several key sections: the overview, target market description, competing titles analysis, author bio and platform, marketing plan, manuscript specification and delivery, table of contents or chapter outline, and sample chapters. We'll discuss each of these, but rather than following the likely order of presentation in the proposal, we'll cover them in the order that you might find them easiest to write.

Competitive Title Analysis

- The competitive title analysis is a good place to start writing your proposal. This section analyzes similar books and explains why yours is different or better.
- To begin, gather all your research and determine which titles are the most important to discuss in your proposal. You should include direct competitors, especially those known as *category killers*. These are well-known titles that are considered the go-to books on their topics. Altogether, this section should include around a dozen titles for most categories.
- For each entry in your competitive title analysis, begin by listing the title, subtitle, author, publisher, year of publication, page count, price, format, ISBN, and specific edition number.
- Next, for each title, briefly summarize the book's key strengths or approach in relation to your own. This is where you differentiate your title from the competition and show why there's a need for your book despite the existence of others. These summaries should run about 100 to 200 words.

- Once you've described all the titles on your list, go back to the beginning and write an introduction to the list that summarizes your book's unique position in the market when compared to the competition. Use such phrases as "This will be the first book to ..." or "This is the only book to"

Author Bio

- For the author bio, you might begin with an existing bio, but be sure to tailor it for the book idea you're proposing. Show how your expertise and experience give you the perfect platform from which to address your target audience. If this is a weak area for you, look for other strengths that might give you credibility with readers or help sell books, such as connections to experts or authorities in the field, a solid online following, or previous success in marketing yourself and your work.
- Most author bios are two or three pages, but that length may double when you include details about your platform. A large commercial publishing house will want to know all the numbers related to your online following, including website or blog traffic, e-mail newsletter subscribers, and so on. You should also describe your offline interaction with the target readership, such as speaking engagements; leadership roles in relevant organizations; regular media jobs, such as writing a regular column; relevant recognitions or achievements; and other published works, including sales numbers if they're respectable.
 - To the best of your ability, quantify the impact your online activity has or the extent of your influence. If you blog, consider how many comments you average per post or how many new readers you gain per month. Look at the metrics provided for your social media accounts and see what percentage of your audience sees your posts and clicks on your links.
 - Here's an example of an effective statement you might make about your online activity: "I have 60,000 followers on Twitter, and Twitter is the second-largest source of traffic to my blog, with 2,000 visits per month. More than half the links that I share on Twitter get at least 100 clicks each."

Target Market Description

- The target market description is where you convince potential publishers that an identifiable market of readers exists who will be compelled to buy your book. Although your book may end up having broad appeal, be disciplined in your initial outline of your audience.
- When describing your market, consider the following factors: age, gender, and income level; education level; media and shopping preferences; preferences for gathering spots, either online or offline; and relevant organizations. Also consider whether the economy affects your market; whether your audience is growing, dwindling, or stagnant; and what challenges or problems your readers face.
- Try to include statistics, trend articles, or other research that comments on the problem your book addresses or the audience that you're trying to reach. Government and nonprofit reports, such as those from Pew Research, can be valuable here. You can also try searching Google Trends for indications of your topic's popularity and currency.
- Here's an example of a specific and persuasive statement about an audience: "Consumer surveys indicate that 70 percent of my target audience plans to spend at least \$1,000 on hobbies this year, and 60 percent indicated that they buy books about their hobbies." You won't always be able to find that kind of specific information, but don't assume it doesn't exist. Many magazines and websites conduct routine customer research and include extensive data in media kits for advertisers. These can be a rich resource for your market analysis.
- A typical market analysis is two to four pages. Make sure it clearly outlines what's at stake for the target audience—how serious the problem or issue is for them. Agents or editors should know exactly how to find your readers, as well as the approximate size of the readership. They should also know enough about the audience to clearly envision how the book will be successfully positioned and packaged to make a sale.

Marketing Plan

- The marketing plan combines the strength of your platform with knowledge of your target audience. This is where you spell out what you can do to market and promote your own book to readers. Never discuss what you hope to do, only what you can and will do, without publisher assistance, given your current resources. This section generally runs two to six pages.
- A good marketing plan has four facets: First, you want to do everything you can to reach readers directly through channels that you own, such as your blog or e-mail newsletter. Second, you need to effectively tap your personal and professional connections and ask them to help spread word of mouth about your book. Third, you should begin to connect with influencers who reach your target audience. Fourth, you should pursue opportunities that put you in front of your target readership in new ways. In your proposal, you might discuss some of the following marketing activities:
 - Creating a posting strategy tied to the launch of your book for your website or blog.
 - Using existing e-mail newsletter lists to push book sales to people who are already interested in your work.
 - Using social media channels to bring awareness to your book.
 - Ramping up your schedule of speaking engagements to support the book launch.
 - Tapping into special contacts or business relationships you have to get coverage or spread word of mouth for the book.
 - Becoming a regular or guest contributor at a highly trafficked website in advance of your book publication.
 - Persuading early supporters of your book to feature it on their sites, blogs, or podcasts.

- The secret to a strong marketing plan isn't the quantity of ideas you have or even the size of your reach but how well you can put to work the network or advantages you have. You need to show how you can tap into readers and influencers who are already in your network to spread the word about your book. You also need to show that you can take real action that will lead to concrete results and a strong connection to the target readership.

Chapter Outline and Sample Chapters

- At the end of your proposal, you should include a table of contents or a chapter outline for the book, followed by one or two sample chapters.

Book Proposal Elements

- Cover Sheet (including book title, author name, and contact information)
- Proposal Table of Contents
- Overview (1–2 pages)
- Target Market Description (2–4 pages)
- Competing Title Analysis (100–200 words per title for about 12 titles)
- Author Bio and Platform (2–6 pages)
- Marketing Plan (2–6 pages)
- Manuscript Specification and Delivery (1 page)
- Table of Contents and/or Chapter Outline (for an outline, 100 words per chapter)
- Sample Chapters (up to about 25 pages)
- Supporting Materials (include where appropriate; e.g., advance praise may go with the marketing plan; sample clips may fall at the end of the proposal)

- A chapter outline generally works better for narrative or meaty works, especially those that are anticipated to come in at 80,000 words or more. For each chapter, write a brief summary of the idea, information, or story presented, usually 100 words per chapter. If writing a chapter outline seems unnecessary for your book's content, then use a table of contents. The goal here is to show the scope and range of material covered in your book.
- If your book has any special features or sidebars—or any kind of unique presentation of content—make sure to convey that information, as well. Any element that might be used as a selling point to readers should be clearly described and included in your outline.
- Sample chapters must prove that you can deliver on your promise of quality information or storytelling. The best strategy is to include one of the meatiest chapters of the book as your sample. For book proposals pitching a long-form narrative, it's best to include the opening chapters, up to about 25 pages.

Overview, Title, and Other Materials

- Although it comes first in the proposal, the last key element to write is the overview, which is the opening statement and summary of your business case. Typically one to two pages, the overview effectively answers the three questions: So what? Who cares? Who are you? The most compelling and juicy details from your proposal should be in the overview.
- The other detail that you might want to save for last is your book title and subtitle. For nonfiction pitches in particular, it's best to be clear, direct, and benefit-oriented with your titles, rather than vague or overly clever. If you absolutely must get creative with the main title, then make the subtitle explanatory to eliminate any confusion about the book's topic. Most publishers also want to see topic keywords in the title or subtitle to ensure that the book can be easily discovered through online searches.

- Some authors may find it useful to have additional supporting materials in their proposals, and agents and editors are generally accepting of any materials that will help build a good case for your book's publication. One of the more popular inclusions is a foreword, introduction, or some kind of advance praise or testimonial from an influential person or another author. If you've written extensively on the topic in other venues, you may also want to include a few clips of your work.
- For books that require photography or illustrations, include a section that explains how the art will be sourced, obtained, or commissioned. If you intend to create or source the art yourself, include samples in the proposal.
- Finally, if you have ideas for multimedia features—either as marketing and promotional tools or for an enhanced e-book edition or app—create a section in your proposal that addresses those opportunities.

Suggested Reading

Herman, *Write the Perfect Book Proposal*.

Larsen, *How to Write a Book Proposal*.

Lyon, *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write*.

Exercises

1. Once you have a rough draft of your proposal, set it aside for a few days, then return to it with a fresh set of eyes. As you reread it, look for evidence that there is demand for the book. Does the proposal show why the market needs the book? Often, authors focus too much on the specifics of the content and not enough on why the content will succeed in the market.
2. Many businesses create customer personas, with specific names, to help them understand and make sure they remain focused on their audience. Try creating an ideal reader profile for your book. In about 200 words, describe the reader's daily life and most pressing concerns. Name your reader, and as you write and revise your proposal, keep him or her in mind.

Submissions and Publishing Etiquette

Lecture 11

In this lecture, we'll cover the proper etiquette for submitting your work, but first, we also need to address whether you're ready to submit. After you've finished your novel draft, you may be tempted to send it out to agents or editors immediately. But in all likelihood, you'll be rejected. Before you submit a manuscript or book proposal, you must ask yourself: Is this the best I can make it? If you have doubts, take time to correct any weaknesses. Always keep in mind that the publishing industry moves slowly, and it's unlikely that you'll miss an important window of opportunity just by waiting a few weeks to polish your materials before you submit.

Industry Standards for Submissions

- Unless you've found guidelines from an agent or editor that spell out unique formatting requirements, you should submit your materials in accordance with general industry standards.
- For query letters sent through regular mail, use a standard block-letter format, with one-inch margins and single-spaced text. The query letter should look straightforward and professional.
- A book manuscript should be double-spaced throughout. The most common fonts used are Arial, Times New Roman, or Courier in 12-point size. Again, use one-inch margins on all sides.
 - Your manuscript should have a title page that includes the book title, your name, and your contact information, typically centered on the page.
 - Create a header for each page that includes your last name, the title of your novel in all caps, and the page number. Make sure every page is numbered, except for the title page.
 - Each new chapter should start on its own page, about one-third of the way down the page. Center the chapter number and title if

there is one. Generally, you should begin the body of the chapter about four to six lines below the chapter number and title.

- Indent for each new paragraph. Don't add spaces between paragraphs or use block paragraphs.
- These same guidelines can be applied to your book proposal, with each new section of the proposal starting on a new page.
- When sending a query via e-mail, be aware that copying and pasting text from your word-processing software into your e-mail often results in strange formatting. For this reason, you should format a special version of your query letter that's only for electronic submissions. Save your query as a simple text file, which will strip it of all formatting. Use all capitals instead of italics for book titles and make sure there are no indents.
 - The first line of the e-mail query should be the salutation, and your contact information should go at the bottom. Don't send attachments unless explicitly advised to do so. If you're asked to send attachments, find out what file type is preferred; if in doubt, send documents in PDF format, which can be opened by virtually any type of computer or device.
 - The subject line of your e-mail should include the word *Query*, followed by your book title, unless you find other specific guidelines.
- When sending manuscript materials through the mail, print everything one-sided, and keep documents loose or paper-clipped together. Avoid folding materials whenever possible, and don't use binders or protective folders.

Terminology of Submission Guidelines

- Submission guidelines outline the specific submission preferences of publishers and agents. As you'll discover, such guidelines tend to have their own terminology.

- *SASE* is an acronym for “self-addressed, stamped envelope.” A SASE is almost always requested for any snail-mail submissions. The agent or publisher will respond to you, often with a one-page rejection letter, using the SASE.
- The term *unsolicited* means that the materials weren’t requested from authors. Some markets state in their guidelines that they don’t review unsolicited manuscripts, which usually means you need to query first. Other markets may indicate that they don’t accept any type of unsolicited material, including queries, which means they are effectively closed. The only way to approach a closed market is to have an agent or to get a referral from an existing author or client.
- Some guidelines may state that *simultaneous submissions* are not accepted. This is a manuscript submitted for consideration to more than one publisher or agent at the same time. Usually the term refers strictly to manuscripts under consideration, not query letters, which are commonly sent out in batches.
- Another term you may come across is *multiple submission*, which refers to sending more than one story idea or manuscript for consideration at a time. Almost no market allows for this, and it should be strictly avoided. Even if you hope to write a series, pitch only the first book in your query, not the entire series. If your first query is rejected, you may query about another project, but you should probably wait a few months before doing so.
- Some guidelines state that previously published work is not accepted. When referring to a book manuscript, this most often means that you shouldn’t have self-published the work or otherwise widely distributed it to the public. Posting your work in online critique groups or private communities doesn’t count as publication.

Author Rights

- The advice in this section is directed toward writers of prose and poetry. If you are a scriptwriter or playwright, you should refer to the Writers Guild of America for an understanding of your rights.

- It is not possible under current U.S. law to copyright an idea or a title. But note that the likelihood of having your idea stolen is almost zero. You should feel free to share your work with trusted advisers, send it to agents and editors, and talk about it when you're networking at conferences. Unless you are known in the industry for coming up with million-dollar concepts, you probably won't experience idea theft.
 - No matter how valuable you think your idea is, do not tell an editor or agent that you can't disclose the full details without a signed nondisclosure agreement. You will be rejected outright if you withhold information about a project that would help an editor or agent make a decision about whether to do business with you.
 - You must be upfront and clear about every aspect of your project. Don't expect anyone to go out of the way to create a special business agreement with you because you're nervous about idea theft.

- When it comes to protecting written work, you do not have to officially register it with the U.S. Copyright Office for it to be protected under the law. As the law is currently written, as soon as you express your work in tangible form, it is protected. However, you would need to register the work if you found infringement and wished to sue. Also, you don't need to put the copyright symbol anywhere on your work for it to be protected under the law. But if you self-publish your work or otherwise distribute it publicly, then you should officially register it with the U.S. Copyright Office.



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When you send your work to agents and editors, they know that it's automatically protected under the law and don't need a copyright notice or symbol to remind them of that fact.

- When you submit material to agents or publishers, essentially, you are offering limited-time rights to your work, but you rarely offer all rights. Authors keep copyright to their work, then grant publishers or others permission to exploit those rights on their behalf. Publishers' submission guidelines often indicate what rights they expect to receive as part of a deal. Assuming you haven't granted rights to any other party, then you own full rights and can grant them selectively to anyone you choose.
 - If some portion of your work has been previously published, you must be clear about that upfront. It's generally not a problem, but you must look at the publication contract you signed to be sure.
 - When you publish shorter works, the publication generally takes one-time publication rights that are exclusive for a brief time period, and you continue to have rights to the work afterward.
 - Whatever your situation, to avoid any surprises, make it clear in your query or proposal that portions of the work have been previously published if that's the case.
- Another area where you need to exercise caution is when pitching a work that includes significant material from other published work. For instance, if you want to publish a collection of quotations, you'll quickly run into permission issues. Whenever you quote or excerpt other people's copyrighted work within your own, the most important question to address is: Does the quotation or excerpt fall under fair use?
 - The four criteria for determining fair use take into account the following factors: (1) the purpose and character of the use (e.g., commercial or educational); (2) the nature of the copyrighted work; (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the entire quoted work; and (4) the effect of the use on the potential market for, or value of, the quoted work.

- Determining whether your use of quoted material is fair falls into one of the grayest areas of copyright law. Many authors decide to ask for permission when quoting more than a certain number of words from a published work. To eliminate all risk, whenever you quote someone else’s work within your own, contact the copyright owner of the work—usually through the publisher or agent—and request permission.
- You do not need permission to quote from works in the public domain, to state unadorned facts, or to mention book titles or authors of other works. You may also not need permission to quote works that are licensed under Creative Commons; this type of license applies to many websites and blogs.

Attracting Positive Attention

- In some cases, authors are approached by agents and editors and are able to sidestep the submission process. The most common method for attracting attention from editors and agents is to get your work published in venues where they scout for talent. For instance, the “Modern Love” column in *The New York Times* is a popular outlet for agents, and its featured writers are commonly approached for book deals.
- A variation on this method is simply to get media coverage in a mainstream publication. The movie *Julie and Julia* began as a blog that attracted attention and was featured in *The New York Times*; its author then landed a book deal.
- Rather than focusing on a book, those with an entrepreneurial spirit can develop a website or blog with content so significant, fresh, and original that it leads to traditional media coverage or an influencer recommendation. Here, you’re banking on your ability to develop a story or an experience so powerful that it cultivates a network of connections who will ultimately champion you, almost without being asked.

- Despite these strategies, it's not generally advisable to sit around hoping that someone will notice your brilliance. A proactive writer learns how to pitch his or her work effectively.

Suggested Reading

Jassin and Schechter, *The Copyright Permission and Libel Handbook*.

Sambuchino, *Formatting and Submitting Your Manuscript*.

Exercises

1. Before you submit your materials, read at least one or two popular agent blogs, such as those by Rachelle Gardner or Kristin Nelson. Just about all agents talk about the submissions process, good and bad surprises, and what they wish authors knew before submitting. Reading their frank advice can help improve your materials and make sure you're sending only your best work.
2. Conversely, reading author advice about "what I wish I had known" or "what I've learned" can also help you reassess your situation before submitting. Give it a try; search for writers who discuss lessons learned about publishing. One of my favorites is by author Scott Berkun, "28 (Better) Things No One Tells You about Publishing."

Networking: From Writers' Conferences to Courses

Lecture 12

Anyone with an established career knows the role that relationships can play in growth and success. Opportunities often come from the connections you already have in place, rather than from strangers outside your network. Although it's possible to secure an agent or publisher as a relative unknown who isn't involved in the larger writing community, you can shorten your learning curve and enjoy yourself more if you reach out to other writers and professionals during both the writing and the submission process. Even if you don't live in an urban area known for writing and publishing, you can still build valuable connections through online forums, writers' organizations, and conferences. We'll discuss all these networking venues in this lecture.

Conferences and Retreats

- Hundreds if not thousands of writing conferences are held every year in the United States. Some have been run for decades and have a strong tradition of nurturing new writing talent. Although conferences vary widely in their programming and attendance, there are three key reasons to attend one:
 - First, your education and insight into the industry will advance exponentially.
 - Second, a conference can give you clarity about the next steps in your writing career.
 - Third, conferences give you an opportunity to connect with a peer group and find people who can become trusted mentors after the events are over.
- Some conferences are craft-focused, while others are business-focused. Until you have a finished manuscript and are in a position to actively pitch, it's better to attend craft-focused conferences. That

way, you can spot potential weaknesses in your work and improve it before you submit.

- Your chances of making close contact with speakers can be greater at a small conference, but large conferences often feature famous authors, agents, and editors as speakers. Determine what's important to you: intimate interactions with a small group or a wide cast of speakers and choices with less personal treatment.
- If you feel confident that your work is ready to submit, then a conference may be the perfect way to sidestep part of the cold-query process. Most conferences offer individual consultations with speakers, editors, or agents, either as part of the registration fee or for an additional fee. Usually, such personal feedback must be scheduled ahead of time, especially if it includes a manuscript critique. When setting up a consultation or appointment, make sure you select the most appropriate agent or editor for your work.



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Make sure to attend both formal and informal conference events; even if you don't get to talk to a speaker, you can learn a great deal by just listening to others at lunch.

- Even if you're not pitching, always closely study the background of every speaker, author, agent, and editor who will attend the conference. Having this knowledge may spark questions to ask during panels or social hours.
- During a conference, avoid asking speakers, editors, or agents for favors outright. It's not good etiquette to ask someone to read your manuscript for free or to insist on a referral. It's also not polite to pitch your work outside of the formal appointment times.
- In case you feel at a loss during any conversation at a conference, here are two questions to either spark a good conversation or get one back on track. These questions are inspired by author Michael Ellsberg, who recommends you use them at any gathering to help grow your network.
 - The first question is: What's most exciting for you right now? The second is: What's challenging for you right now?
 - These questions often bring to light information or experiences that help you better understand the life or business of the person you're talking to, while indicating areas where you might be useful.
- Before making a big investment in attending an event, compare the success of the speakers to the success you want to achieve. There should be some commonality there. If possible, ask past attendees about the strengths and weaknesses of the event and whether they felt it was helpful.
- Some people who start out by attending conferences soon discover the value of writer's colonies or retreats. These are places that allow you to write, uninterrupted, for hours each day. Although every colony is slightly different, all provide a private atmosphere meant to encourage writing and the opportunity to interact with other writers, if you desire it. Some colonies have a formal application process that requires writing samples and recommendations, and getting accepted can be a major credit on your bio.

Writers' Organizations

- Many writers find that membership in one of the major writing organizations can be an important component of their professional network. The largest and most active organizations are affiliated with specific genres. They include: the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), the Romance Writers of America (RWA), the Mystery Writers of America (MWA), and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA).
- In addition to national offices, these organizations have regional chapters that meet regularly. They host annual conferences, offer awards, and produce member magazines and newsletters. If you write in a specific genre, these organizations can be essential to getting focused, in-depth information that isn't known or discussed elsewhere.
- You'll also find a range of state writers' associations with active regional chapters, which are better suited to writers who aren't affiliated with a specific genre. Also look for literary nonprofits that focus on serving writers and the broader reading community. For example, The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis and GrubStreet in Boston are both successful nonprofit organizations that offer affordable writing classes, bring in speakers, and host community events focused on writing and literature.
- Finally, the Authors Guild is a national professional organization of book and magazine writers. To become a member, you must meet certain publication requirements. The guild is involved in such issues as free speech, copyright, and taxes and represents the interests of writers in Congress and in the courts. Of particular interest to beginning writers, the organization also provides information on standard book and magazine contracts.

Continuing Education in Writing

- Most creative writers will tell you that experience or practice in the art trumps education. However, academic creative writing programs can be valuable because they give you time and space to focus on

your writing, and they include regular criticism from professors and peers. Keep in mind, though, that such programs are concerned with the art of writing, not the business.

- Low-residency M.F.A. programs in creative writing are targeted at people who are unable or unwilling to return to school full-time. Instead of attending conventional classes, in these programs, you complete most of your work remotely, in collaboration with professors. Then, you occasionally travel to campus for brief onsite residencies, where you work in-person with professors and other students.
- Because any type of degree program can be expensive, the practical choice for many writers is to invest in local or online writing classes. Look for instructors who have experience helping writers produce publishable work and for courses that offer frequent, detailed critiques of your work, not just lectures or general evaluations.
- The advantage of online classes is flexibility and choice, but probably the most important quality of any class, regardless of environment, is that it pushes you to produce work on a deadline. Sometimes, without that external pressure, it can be difficult to make time to write.

Critique Groups

- A *critique group* is generally made up of three or four writers who provide one another with constructive feedback. Because these groups vary widely in their discipline and focus, you should look for one that shares your values and goals, whether getting published, getting critiqued, or just getting out of the house.
- One danger of critique groups is that when you're working with people at the same level as you, a group discussion may feel like the blind leading the blind. Some members may have particular pet peeves or even bad judgment when it comes to offering feedback. To make sure your group remains constructive and helpful, you might find it useful to adopt the *Lerman method* for offering feedback.

- First, make a specific statement about something you found meaningful or exciting in the work. Beginning with positives is important because writers are often unconscious of what they're doing well.
 - Next, allow questions from the writer. This begins a dialogue that supports the writer in solving problems independently.
 - The third step is to allow group members to ask questions. This lets the writer know where readers need additional information.
 - The final step is a discussion of group members' opinions about what should happen next in the book or how it should be revised.
- If you can't find a good critique group by attending conferences or classes, try seeking out critiques through online forums and communities.

Online Resources

- Of course, there are innumerable online resources available to writers, both from professional sources and from more informal blogs and message boards. Some of these are legitimate and useful, and others have little to no value; the worst are scams. As a general rule, you can trust the recommendations for online resources that come from respected writing publications, such as *Writer's Digest*, *The Writer*, *Poets and Writers*, and *The Chronicle* (published by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs [AWP]).
- As mentioned earlier, Writer Beware is an important online hub for writers who have concerns about any publisher, service, or organization in the writing community. *The Independent Publishing Magazine* by Mick Rooney is a website that regularly reviews and discusses new self-publishing and digital services for writers. It's one of the rare resources that is comprehensive and objective about this sector of the industry.

- For writers actively writing and submitting shorter works or entering contests, Submittable is the industry-wide standard online submissions system. If you're in the literary publishing community, you'll likely end up establishing a Submittable account and using it as a dashboard to check on the status of your submissions. Submittable also runs a site called Submishmash, which attempts to present all the potential creative opportunities available for writers and artists.
- Finally, especially for young fiction writers, Wattpad is becoming one of the most popular community sites for posting writing in serialized form and starting to build a readership. Even major publishers have started partnering with Wattpad to discover and publish new talent found at the site.

Suggested Reading

Levine, *The Writing and Critique Group Survival Guide*.

May, *The Low-Residency MFA Handbook*.

Exercises

1. Visit Shaw Guides and search for writing conferences and workshops in your region.
2. If you write in a specific genre, identify the closest regional chapter of that genre's writing organization and find out when and where its regular meetings are held. If your genre doesn't have a national organization or chapters, see if your city or state has a nonprofit writers' center or organization.

Pitching Your Book

Lecture 13

As we discussed in the previous lecture, most writing conferences offer opportunities to meet with agents or editors one-on-one and pitch your work. Writers often experience the pitch as a highly intense, emotional, and personal process, but whenever engaging in a business conversation, it's important to have some distance and perspective. Authors who have a business or marketing background, for example, know that getting an idea shot down isn't personal, and they're more likely to be receptive to a conversation about the marketability of a project and alternative routes to success. As we'll see in this lecture, the best approach to a pitch is to try to view it as part of the business of being a writer.

Difficulties of the Pitch

- One of the most common difficulties writers have with pitches is that they may have little experience or practice in pitching. This means that they're nervous before the pitch meeting, and all that anxious energy detracts from the quality of the pitch. Some writers expect their heart and their passion for their work to carry the pitch, but unfortunately, feeling passionate doesn't always translate into a persuasive pitch. You have to know how to position and sell yourself, rather than stress your dedication to your work.
- In addition, some writers place too much importance on the pitch, treating it as the official verdict on whether an idea is worthy of further investment of time. The reality is that there's still a great deal of subjectivity at play in a pitch. Plus, in-person pitches have about the same success rate as a cold query, typically, less than 1 percent.
 - Because you are so focused on hearing a verdict about your work, you might miss out on the biggest benefit of the pitch experience: getting instant feedback on your project. The pitch is your chance to have a meaningful conversation with an industry insider about the market for your work. Such information can dramatically reduce future frustration and

shorten your path to publication.

- Agents and editors remember those authors who demonstrate flexibility and openness to feedback during the pitch. Publishing professionals look for people they'd enjoy working with and those



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who are focused on long-term career growth and success. A writer who is too invested in a single project—seeking validation for a book that's the product of a decade of work—can be a red flag. It's a sign of a writer stagnating rather than growing.

Sometimes, just five minutes of insightful professional advice received during a pitch meeting can change your perspective, approach, or slant.

Types of Pitches

- There are usually three types of pitches, the first of which is the pitch slam—the equivalent of pitch speed-dating. Here, several dozen agents and editors are available during a concentrated period of time, usually a few hours. Writers line up to speak with a specific agent or editor and get a few minutes to pitch their projects. Pitch slams are typically high-pressure environments, and you need to go in with your pitch memorized. If the agent or editor is interested, you'll be told how to follow up, usually by sending in your materials after the event.
- You probably shouldn't participate in a pitch slam unless you have submission-ready material—a completed, polished manuscript or book proposal ready to go. It doesn't do you much good to get an invitation to send materials, then follow up 6 or 12 months later when the agent or editor has forgotten you. He or she may still review your materials, but any good impression you made won't work in your favor, and the original invitation might have been based on the timeliness of your idea.

- Also, pitch slams don't offer enough time to have a solid conversation about the marketability of your work or your best path forward. If you're looking for a quick thumbs-up or thumbs-down on your work to assess its immediate marketability, the pitch slam is a good option. If you want professional feedback, you need to consider another type of pitch opportunity.
- A second type of pitch is a scheduled appointment; here, you get 10 to 20 minutes to sit down with an editor or agent and discuss your work. Sometimes, you have to pay extra for these opportunities, or you may get one free appointment with your conference registration fee. Keep in mind that these appointments are valuable only if you're able to select the person you'll meet with, which is almost always the case. Never meet with just any agent or editor; make sure you talk to someone who is actively looking for the type of work you have to offer or has experience editing, selling, or marketing work in your genre or category.
- Perhaps the most meaningful type of appointments are those that include advance review of your materials, such as your query letter and synopsis or even the first 5 to 10 pages of your book. This review gives the agent or editor a baseline understanding of your work before the appointment begins and relieves some of the pressure of explaining your work quickly.
- When you have a pitch appointment, plan to talk less than half the time. Before the meeting, develop a specific list of questions that if answered, would tell you specifically what your next steps are when you leave. Don't attend any appointment expecting to be offered a deal or representation. Go for the learning experience and the opportunity to have a professional consultation. Sometimes it's more valuable to know whether you're headed in the right direction than to succeed immediately with a pitch.
- Pitch appointments result in a high rate of requests for materials because most agents and editors find it easier to agree to look at your materials than to shoot down your dreams. However, most

writers get rejected in a businesslike fashion after they submit their materials, just like those who cold query. Even worse, sometimes, there is no rejection at all—just silence. Remember that you have little control over how agents or editors respond after the fact. All you can control is your professionalism during the pitch and how you steer the conversation while you have the agent or editor’s ear.

Weak and Strong Pitches: Fiction

- A writer who is nervous about a pitch may read directly from his or her query. This isn’t always a bad thing, but you should have a fair amount of confidence in your query before reading it straight through. You won’t be helped by a terrible query that includes extraneous detail or editorializing about the quality of your writing. And don’t use the pitch as a time to talk about how your friends and family love your work. Just as you did in the query letter, leave out opinions that don’t hold weight with a publishing professional.
- Another weak approach to a pitch is to go into mind-numbing detail about the plot and offer no information about the characters. As we’ve discussed, it’s usually best to start with information about the protagonist, although there can be exceptions. For instance, with science fiction or fantasy, it’s often necessary to establish a few details about the universe inhabited in the book. Still, be cautious about just relating facts, especially if your listener doesn’t understand how they connect to the story.
 - If the agent or editor starts to ask a question about the story, don’t interrupt. It’s almost always better to find out what your listener is curious about and hear his or her perspective.
 - Not only does this help you understand how agents and editors think about stories, but it may also reveal how well your pitch is working.
- A strong pitch focuses on the main character and the character’s problem. When it comes to a fiction, it’s much easier to follow a pitch and remain interested when the agent or editor can connect to a character and immediately understand the problem or conflict facing

that character. Why will the reader care? What are the stakes? This same approach could be used for a memoir or nonfiction narrative, as well.

- A good technique in pitching is to pause at a question or a moment of tension in your story and wait for the listener to ask for more. Rather, than talking endlessly (which can sometimes happen when you're nervous), remind yourself that you don't have to explain all the details.
- Try to stop just as you've established the key stakes or tension and wait for a reaction from your listener. Let the agent or editor guide the discussion; find out what might catch a reader's attention or what piece is missing. And if the agent or editor asks you to reveal the ending, then you should.

Weak and Strong Pitches: Nonfiction

- In a weak nonfiction pitch, a writer may not elucidate why his or her approach to the topic will be marketable. The agent or editor must have enough information to at least begin to see how a project will be salable. A weak nonfiction pitch may also fail to outline the credentials of the writer.
- Some writers may assume that having an active blog is sufficient to interest an agent or editor in a pitch meeting. However, no matter how well known your blog is, you still need to think through a viable book concept, something that seems competitive with similar titles on the shelves. A strong pitch needs to demonstrate that you have a compelling vision for your book, and especially with nonfiction, you must be able to succinctly and convincingly express tangible benefits to readers.
- In a successful nonfiction pitch, the conversation builds on questions related to the book's market. In particular, the writer must be prepared to address the biggest questions on the agent's mind: Who is the audience for the book? Why are you the best author for it? Why does anyone care what you have to say? Although the pitch meeting might not answer all these questions fully, a good starting answer could lead to a proposal or manuscript request.

The Breakout Feeling

- For all those writers who walk away disappointed from a pitch experience, remember that success is rarely attained in those 5 to 15 minutes. Rather, it comes from all the years of work leading up to that moment, along with the author’s appearance of confidence and success—the feeling that he or she is on the verge of breaking out. There’s really no way to fake that, and it’s what agents and editors are ultimately looking for.
- People who have the breakout “vibe” look and feel prepared and demonstrate a kind of easy confidence that makes them a pleasure to talk to. They ask smart questions and demonstrate curiosity and engagement. Perhaps most important, they appear flexible but resilient when dealing with the business side of publishing. Agents and editors don’t fear that something they say will hurt the feelings of these writers because they know they’re dealing with professionals.
- When agents and editors meet you and feel as if they’d love to work with you, even if the project you’re pitching isn’t a good fit, then you’re on your way to breaking out.

Suggested Reading

MacGregor, *Step by Step Pitches and Proposals*.

Sheer, *The Writer’s Advantage*.

Exercises

1. Write your hook on an index card or a standard-size sticky note. Keep cutting the hook until it fits on one side of the paper. This is about the right length to start your pitch.
2. Practice your pitch until you can recite it on command. Try it out on at least one stranger before pitching an agent or editor.

Avoiding Common Manuscript Pitfalls

Lecture 14

Many agents and editors believe that they can tell within the first page whether or not a manuscript is worth reading further. Most writers, of course, do not like hearing this, but the reality is that impressions about your work are formed quickly, and these impressions are usually more accurate than not. Agents and editors are exposed to hundreds or thousands of manuscripts every year, enabling them to develop intuition about what's worth their time. Most of the time, agents' and editors' rejections are based on identifying red flags or common problems indicating that a work is unacceptable for publication. In this lecture, we'll discuss the two rough categories of red flags: narrative or structural problems and surface-level errors.

Opening Scenes

- To consider whether your first page or scene can be improved, ask yourself this: What is the absolute latest moment in the manuscript that I can begin the story and still not leave out anything critical to the story problem? Writers often take too long to get the inciting incident, the occurrence that sets the story in motion. Often, the best stories sow the seeds of the story problem in some form on the first page.
- For example, consider the opening lines of *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold: "My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair." In just those three sentences, we get an impressive amount of information, as well as the unique twist that will drive the entire novel: It's narrated by a dead girl.
- Strong openings point immediately to the story tension, without first giving a complete biography of the protagonist or showing the ordinary routine of the characters. It's usually better to allow backstory details to emerge as the story unfolds. Avoid an opening scene that focuses on the mundane details of everyday life, such as

getting up and going to work. Instead, share the most distinctive details—the ones that really matter to shaping the story and character from the start.

- Many writers who are new to novel or memoir writing feel compelled to show how the world and the characters they're creating came to be. Novice writers believe that they need to show what everyday life is like in this world so that readers will better understand the change that's coming. Although developing character background, building the setting, and establishing the rules of the world you're creating are important tasks for writing your story, they aren't elements that need to be conveyed immediately in the first chapters.

Action Openings

- Some writers interpret this advice to mean that they must start the story with action. But starting with action isn't necessarily the solution, and it can lead to story openings that are just as boring as those that are loaded down with background detail.
- The important criteria for an action opening are that it provides some context for the action and that readers quickly understand how or why the action is significant to the story. If your opening scene lacks any kind of characterization, the action might not necessarily have any stakes associated with it. We may see people in danger or in pain, but without knowing how that's tied to the overall conflict or story, we don't know why we should care.
- The art of writing lies in knowing what kind of action will provide exactly the right tone and framework for the story. It should be action that engages readers immediately with the main characters. We should begin to form questions about the characters' lives, which builds tension, making us eager to find out what happens next. To test the effectiveness of your opening scene, ask yourself: What questions have been raised about my main character? What will motivate readers to keep turning the pages? What will they want to find out?

- In an effort to create a tension-filled opening, some writers go way overboard in depicting pain or discomfort. For example: “John clenched his throat and tried to stop the flow of blood, but he couldn’t. His skin became whiter and whiter, and he broke out into a cold sweat. He felt prickles all up and down his back, and his breathing became intensely labored. He squinted into the sun and wondered if this was finally going to be it.”
 - Some writers think this constitutes a tension-filled opening because it shows a precarious situation, but in fact, it shows a misapprehension of the well-known rule “show, don’t tell.” Not everything can or should be shown or dramatized at length. In fact, especially at the story beginning, it can be better to tell rather than show.
 - Here’s how the story about John could be made more effective: “It was during the final hours of his Alaskan wilderness trek that it finally happened. John was attacked from behind. As he tried to stop the flow of blood from his forearm, he rummaged in his pack for the first-aid kit. Then he was attacked again, and that’s when he figured this was going to be the end of him.”
 - The second version keeps some of the mystery of the first opening, but it avoids strictly focusing on John’s physical reaction. Remember that a little description—or “showing”—goes a long way, especially at the start of a story. Dramatizing each event or reaction can slow down a first scene significantly. It’s hard to care about any character’s pain until we know his or her conflict and motivation. Later on in the book, when we’re on the edge of our seats, wondering what will happen to John because we care so much about him—that’s the time to slow down, show, and dramatize.

Additional Rules for Openings

- In general, stick to one point-of-view character per scene or per chapter. Opening scenes that give us the thoughts of multiple characters in quick succession can confuse readers about where their loyalty should lie. Try to establish which main character

we'll sympathize with in the opening by telling the story from that character's perspective for at least the first chapter or so.

- In an effort to build more uniqueness or tension into the opening, some authors create *false suspense*, raising questions that are either unimportant to the larger story or keep readers in the dark about the basics. Withholding a character's name, age, or identity tends to lead to a lack of reader engagement, rather than creating mystery.
- Prologues are an area of debate. Most writers love them, but editors and agents don't. Inside the industry, they're viewed as a classic form of backstory, with the writing dumping information on the reader before starting the real story. Sometimes, prologues are needed and play an important narrative role; other times, they are more of a crutch for a story that has a weak first chapter. For first-time authors, it's wise to skip the prologue unless it's absolutely necessary. Even then, make it short and have a solid hook.
- Like prologues, dream sequences often fail to present a strong framework for the story. Ask yourself how your dream sequence advances the story, whether it contains relevant conflict or tension, and why it's the best available opening to you. Even if the dream is a key part of the story's tension or overall plot, be careful about including long dream descriptions until readers are further into the narrative and committed to your characters. Similarly, it's best to avoid flashbacks until the reader is a few chapters in and the story conflict is established.
- There's considerable disagreement on the role of dialogue in a story opening—whether it should be used, how it should be used, and how long a dialogue-heavy scene should run before some description is offered. Two good rules to follow here are: (1) Avoid character dialogue in the opening that essentially offers mini-biographies of the characters, and (2) if you start with dialogue, try to be as clear as possible about the context and the identities of the speakers.

- Avoid interior monologue in your opening. Such openings don't give us much of a scene, don't allow us to see the main character interact with others, and don't provide any kind of significant action.
- With a memoir, don't begin by focusing on bitterness or anger. These emotions can't be the sole reason or hook for your story and can lead to quick rejection. The same is true of stories that are focused on pain or victimhood. Writing during the grieving process is a proven method for healing but not for getting published.
- Just as novels do, memoirs must have characters and be told in scenes. Your memoir must have a definitive beginning, middle, and end, not attempt to tell everything about your life. Too many memoirs include extra anecdotes or irrelevant events that don't tie into the narrative arc. Remember: Just because something happened to you doesn't mean that it belongs in your memoir; it must hold interest for others, be necessary to how the story unfolds, and not distract.



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In evaluating the first pages of your memoir, agents and editors look for a voice or perspective that makes the story compelling and offers vibrancy that will help set it apart from other works on the same topic.

Surface-Level Errors

- Surface-level issues include the mechanics of language, such as grammar, syntax, and punctuation, as well as issues of formatting and style.
- On the subject of grammar, many writers need to learn that perfect grammar has little to do with publishable writing. Certainly, those who have a strong grasp of grammar often have more sensitivity for the nuance of language and, therefore, might be better writers,

but facility with grammar has nothing to do with great storytelling. Agents and editors won't praise your error-free prose, but they will praise compelling stories and memorable characters.

- Further, grammar is a surface-level issue that is usually addressed near the end of the writing process and can be corrected or polished by someone else. Most publishers hire freelancer editors to take care of grammar-level and style issues.
- That said, if your work is so riddled with grammatical errors that it distracts from reading, you need to solve that problem before you submit. There's little excuse for repeatedly incorrect punctuation, misspellings, and run-on sentences. Although an occasional error won't be held against you, multiple errors may indicate that you lack the fundamental skills needed for a writing career.

Suggested Reading

Browne and King, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*.

Lukeman, *The First Five Pages*.

Exercises

1. If you have a completed manuscript, study your opening chapters. What's the very latest you could start the story and still have everything make sense? In what scene does your main character confront the problem that will persist throughout the book and end up changing the character? Consider how that moment can come sooner.
2. Return to the last few books you've read that match the genre or category in which you write. Analyze the first five pages. What techniques or strategies does the author use to keep you reading?

Hiring a Professional Editor

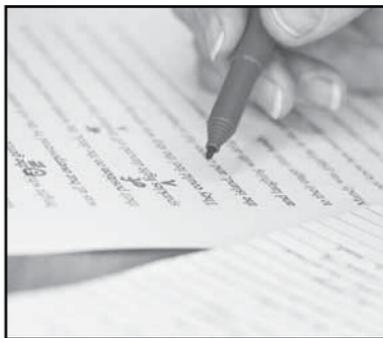
Lecture 15

There are three primary reasons to hire a professional to review your writing: First, you'll grow as a writer by working with an expert who can point out your strengths and weaknesses and give you feedback on taking your work to the next level. Second, you'll increase your understanding of the publishing industry by experiencing a quality editorial process. And third, you will use the editor's feedback to prepare your work for submission to an agent or publisher. But before you hire anyone to edit your work, you need to understand the different stages of writing and revising, the different types of editing available, and what an editor can and can't do in terms of making your work publishable.

Types of Editing

- *Developmental editing* is most commonly used for nonfiction work, especially by traditional book publishers. Developmental editors (DEs) focus on the structure and content of your book; if they work for a publisher, their job is to ensure that the manuscript adheres to the vision of the work agreed to by all parties to the contract.
 - DEs are often involved while the writing process is still ongoing. They may ask you to justify how the choices you're making as you write will serve the readership. You'll find the DE raising the question of audience again and again: Will the audience understand? Will the audience care? What does the audience need to know at each stage?
 - You should think of DEs as trusted advisors. Their goal is always to produce the best book possible for the reader, and their suggestions are made with an eye toward garnering more sales. They will be concerned with the narrative arc if there needs to be one, the organization of material, and missed opportunities. They'll do their best offer solutions to any inconsistencies or structural problems.

- Of course, authors can be sensitive to feedback that can lead to changing a book’s structure or eliminating large sections. As a result, some writers find developmental editing uncomfortable. A thorough development edit will mean letting go of things that may be important to you personally but might not belong in the book from a market-driven perspective.
- Whether you can overcome your discomfort largely depends on whether you trust your editor and whether you view the editing process as a means of professional development—a way to improve your own abilities and perspective on your work.
- Like developmental editing, *content editing* is focused on structure, style, and overall development, for both fiction and nonfiction. However, content editors almost never work on a manuscript while it’s still in progress.
- Both developmental and content editing fall under the category of higher-level editing, a process that inevitably leads to revision and substantive changes in the work. If you’re working with an editor at this level, don’t expect validation or praise but, rather, an extensive editorial letter and manuscript notations, with detailed advice, to help you successfully revise.
- A thorough developmental or content edit can be quite expensive. An alternative to this type of edit is a more general *manuscript assessment*, where an industry professional reads and assesses the strengths and



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Knowing what type of editor to hire requires some level of self-awareness about where your manuscript is in the writing process and what types of suggestions would be beneficial to you.

weaknesses of your manuscript. You won't get page-by-page advice on revision but a broader overview of how to improve the work.

- Sentence- or surface-level types of editing include line editing, copyediting, and proofreading.
 - *Line editing* focuses on sentence structure, word use, and rhythm. Its goal is to create smooth and streamlined prose.
 - *Copyediting* is focused on correcting errors in grammar, syntax, and usage. Some copyeditors also fact-check and point out inconsistencies or lapses in logic.
 - *Proofreading* comes at the end of the editorial process, sometimes after the book is already typeset. At this late stage, an editor looks only for typos, formatting mistakes, and egregious errors.
- Before hiring an editor, it's critical that you understand exactly what level of editing or service will be provided. Don't hire a rules-based editor—someone who will look for sentence-level errors—when what you really need is a big-picture editor to identify strengths and weaknesses in your work.

Hiring an Editor

- One of the best ways to find an editor is to ask other writers for recommendations. You might also check out PublishersMarketplace.com, where you can find freelancers who are knowledgeable about the publishing industry and may even work with traditional publishers and agents. In addition, you can search established associations of editors, such as the Editorial Freelancers Association in the United States and the Society for Freelance Editors and Proofreaders in the United Kingdom.
- Most experienced editors specialize in genres or categories, as well as specific types of editing. You'll get the best results by hiring an editor who has a long track record of editing within your category of work.

- To ensure that there's a good fit and that expectations about the services are clear, an editor may first work on a sample section of your book, for which you may or may not be charged. It's unwise to hire an editor until you feel confident that the two of you are a good match; an editorial review is a big investment, and you want to reduce the possibility of a surprise at the end.
- Avoid any kind of editing situation where you don't know the specific editor you'll be working with, as is often the case with self-publishing or other package services. It's important that you're able to communicate directly with the person editing your work.
- Sometimes, during the submissions process, an agent or publisher may recommend that you retain the services of an editor and resubmit after the revision. You may be sent to a specific service or freelancer who is trusted by the agent or publisher, but always independently vet any recommendations you receive. And remember that it is inappropriate for traditional publishers or agents to charge you for editing services they provide.
- Inexperienced writers too often assume that a friend or colleague who has an English degree or is an English teacher is qualified as a professional editor. Editing isn't about academic credentials or having a good eye for typos. Book editing is a specialized area of expertise, and the average English major has never been exposed to either the book publishing industry or what professional book editors do for a living.
- Seek a professional with a clear record of book-related experience who is willing to share the specifics of his or her writing and publishing credentials. Consider it a good sign when an editor is selective about taking on projects and doesn't have immediate availability. However, you also need to be realistic about who you'll be able to hire. The editors of bestselling books might be perpetually unavailable or out of your price range. They're more likely to turn down manuscripts that they don't think are ready for their level of expertise.

Evaluating Editorial Services

- With the increase in the number of writers self-publishing their work has come an increase in the number of services offering assistance. Before you decide to hire one of these services—or any editor—ask the following questions:
 - Who’s behind the service? Do the editors have experience that applies to what you’re trying to do? What’s the bias, if any, of the people behind the service?
 - What’s the business model? Under what terms does the service make money?
 - Is the service transparent? You should expect any freelancer or editorial service to be upfront about the specific services provided.
 - Is the service authoritative? If you don’t know what distinguishes a trustworthy and experienced editor or service provider from an inexperienced one, then ask for success stories, testimonials, and recommendations.
 - Are the promises made reasonable or realistic, or does the service seem positioned mostly to make a sale? Ethical services don’t overpromise what they’re able to provide or lavish praise on you.
- The bottom line is this: Always make sure you need a specific kind of help before you pay for it. Do your research before committing. Get second and third opinions. And have appropriate expectations for how far a professional service can take you.

Beta Readers

- As we’ve mentioned, the demand for editors has increased with self-publishing, and today, many authors are aware that they need some level of assistance in rewriting and polishing their work. But few authors can afford professional-level, deep editing.

- At the same time, writing processes themselves are evolving. Today, the publishing world is seeing more collaborative work, more serializations, and more publication of works in progress.
- In this changing environment, instead of a formal editing process that aligns with traditional publishing practices, some writers are taking advantage of *beta readers*—smart readers who volunteer to serve as an author’s first editors.
- This model is most prevalent in online writing and fan-fiction communities and within the self-publishing community. Authors identify trusted fans or colleagues who are willing to read and offer feedback on unpublished work for free. As authors gain experience and titles under their belt, they may progress from using beta readers to hiring paid editing teams, but they continue to bring in beta readers during certain stages of the editorial process.
- In the world of computer software, beta testers try to identify bugs in software before it is released. In a similar manner, a beta reader helps a writer avoid sending a story out into the world with embarrassing problems. Sometimes, finding a good group of beta readers is as difficult as finding a qualified professional editor, given the amount of time and effort that must be donated. If you’re an active member of online writing communities, though, you’ll quickly learn how and where to find readers for your own work.
- Beta readers are more closely identified with fiction writing and publishing, although they can be used for any genre. In the nonfiction world, you’ll sometimes hear about *crowdsourcing* as a replacement for some level of development and content editing. The crowdsourcing approach makes content available faster, gets real-time feedback from the target audience, and shapes the final product based on collaboration.
- If you decide that beta readers or crowdsourcing might play a role in your writing and revision process, don’t forget that the burden

will be on you to figure out what advice is actually good and worth acting on and what feedback isn't on target.

- As you go through any editorial process, remember that revision is what separates serious writers from everyone else; professional authors revise their work multiple times, with and without professional advice. If you expect to get anywhere in your writing career, you'll need to find the right process or method for revising. The process of editing is one each writer develops individually through experience and trial and error.

Suggested Reading

Gross, *Editors on Editing*.

Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*.

Exercises

1. Visit a site where unpublished writers post their work openly for critique from other writers. Popular sites include Book Country, Authonomy, and Kindle Scout. Read a few first chapters and see what captures your attention, then read the comments or critiques. Interestingly, sometimes the best way to improve your writing is to read something that doesn't work at all and identify the reasons behind the errors.
2. If you can't afford a professional editor, explore an online critique community, such as Scribophile, where you can offer feedback on others' work and earn points, then get your own work critiqued by other members.

How Writers Handle Rejection

Lecture 16

As we've discussed throughout this course, writers seeking publication must learn to see their writing as a product. When you submit work to an agent or publisher, you're entering into a business transaction, and a large part of the business of publishing involves the rejection of work that doesn't meet a variety of requirements or standards. Of course, that's easy to say. We can all acknowledge rejection as a logical aspect of publishing. At the same time, it's difficult to overcome the emotional sting of being told that the project you've spent years working on isn't worth further consideration. In this lecture, we'll discuss how to let go of rejection or react to it in a constructive manner.

Responding to Rejection Constructively

- Receiving rejections is simply a reality for writers who want to see their work published. But the rejection itself isn't as important as what you decide to do next.
 - First, acknowledge the hurt you feel. Wallow in pain for a set amount of time—perhaps five minutes or five days—then get back to work.
 - Next, avoid parsing vague or form rejection letters. If you get useful feedback, consider it a gift and use it to improve your work. If you violently disagree with any criticism you receive, that might be the rarest gift of all. Put your work aside for a few weeks or months, then revisit it. You may find that the criticism is right on the money.
 - Finally, promise yourself that you won't lose total confidence after rejection. Whatever uncertainty plagues you is natural and part of the process. Sometimes, the best way to deal with it is to continue to read and write what you love.

- Every writer finds coping mechanisms or rituals that help deal with rejection. Some writers keep their work always out on submission, meaning that if one rejection comes back, the work is always under consideration elsewhere. This is smart because it's dangerous to tie all your hopes to one editor, publisher, or agent.
- Once you finish a manuscript, you should also immediately start work on another project. This helps create distance and perspective from the project you just finished—which will inevitably need to be revisited with a more critical eye later.

Common Reasons for Rejection

- The most basic and avoidable reason for rejection is that you submitted your work to someone who is ultimately inappropriate to receive it. This probably means that you didn't properly research agents and editors and adopted a mass submission approach.
- Another common reason for rejection is that something similar was recently published or that you're trying to publish in a category that is saturated. This happens particularly with nonfiction work but can also occur in fiction, when everyone seems to be capitalizing on noticeable trends.
- One of the toughest types of rejections to accept is one that includes a complimentary note but states that the market for the work is too small. If you receive such a letter, you might try approaching a smaller publisher or self-publishing. You might also consider ways in which you can make your book appear more marketable, although this isn't particularly easy. Many talented writers simply don't think like marketers.
- Other standard reasons you might be given in a rejection letter including the following:
 - “Doesn't fit our needs at this time.” This is a stock phrase in the publishing world that you shouldn't try to interpret because it could literally mean anything.

- “Doesn’t have sufficient market appeal.” Again, perhaps the market for your work is too small, or perhaps your work lacks punch.
- “Just couldn’t get excited about it.” This comment about a fiction work usually reflects a weak story or protagonist.
- “The writing doesn’t stand out.” Your writing lacks style, sophistication, and voice, or your story is boring, unoriginal, or uninspired.
- “Not fresh enough.” For fiction writers, perhaps your plot line is too cliché, your characters are too common, or your story is not unique.
- “You don’t have a sufficient platform.” This reason is given most often to nonfiction writers who lack adequate credentials, authority, or visibility to the target market.

Personalized Rejections

- Personalized rejections obviously take more time and thought than form letters and are sent only if an agent or editor sees something in your work that might merit consideration in the future. You should consider such communications a sign that you’re getting closer to publication.
- Sometimes, a personalized rejection comes with an invitation to submit your next work or resubmit your work if you make changes to it.
 - Never undertake revision to your work unless you believe that the suggestions will improve it. If the feedback opens your eyes to how your work could be genuinely taken to the next level, you should hit the pause button, revise, and resubmit.
 - However, if you have doubts about the feedback, keep submitting and see if you receive any more personalized rejections. If a pattern emerges in the feedback, that’s a strong case for revision.

- Whatever happens, there's only one proper response to a personalized rejection, and that's a thank you. Do not try to open up a conversation about the work unless explicitly invited to do so and never argue with a rejection.
 - Getting past the rejection phase and finding a way to build a relationship with a potential agent or publisher often means understanding that person's motivation. Arguing over a rejection or pleading for attention won't accomplish that.



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The new rejection in the publishing world is often silence, partly because of the sheer volume of submissions received and partly because editors have grown tired of unprofessional responses to rejection.

- If you find an opportunity to talk to agents or editors at a conference, instead of thinking about all the things you want from them or devising clever ways to influence them, demonstrate your curiosity. Ask such questions as: What's the most challenging part of your job? What do you look for in a partnership with an author? What do you wish every author knew before entering into a partnership with you? In response, you'll gain insight that could be useful the next time you submit your work.

Are You Wasting Your Time?

- Let's say that you've gone through the submission process and haven't been able to gain any traction. No agent or publisher has expressed any serious interest, and you don't know whether you can make your work more marketable or you're just wasting your time. Now may be the time to take stock of where you're headed and correct your path if necessary.

- One common time-wasting behavior that leads to fast rejection is submitting manuscripts that aren't your best work. You must give each manuscript everything you've got, with nothing held back, rather than saving your best effort for the future. To be competitive, your book must be better than you ever thought possible. If you think your work has a problem, then it does, and any story with a problem is not ready to be submitted for publication.
- Another time waster is pursuing the wrong path to publication, such as trying to secure a book deal from a major publisher for a niche work. You must be honest with yourself about the commercial potential for your work; not every book deserves distribution to every bookstore in the country.
- Further, some writers—particularly fiction writers—focus on publishing far too early, when they should be focused on writing. Although it's helpful to be active in the publishing community, too many writers develop anxiety about the publishing process before they've demonstrated that they can commit to writing and revising thousands of words—that is, before they put in the work necessary to create a publication-ready manuscript.

Closing in on a Deal

- Three questions often strongly indicate how close a writer is to a traditional publishing deal:
 - How long have you been working on this manuscript, and who has seen it?
 - Is this the first manuscript you've ever completed?
 - How long have you been actively writing?
- Many first manuscript attempts are not publishable, even after revision, yet they are necessary and vital for a writer's growth. A writer who's just finished a first manuscript probably doesn't realize this and will likely take the rejection process hard. At the same time, a writer who has been working on the same manuscript

for many years—and has written nothing else—might be tragically stuck. There isn't usually much valuable learning going on when someone tinkers with the same pages over a decade.

- Writers who have been actively writing for many years, have produced multiple full-length manuscripts, have trusted critique partners or mentors, and have attended a few major writing conferences are often well-positioned for publication. They probably know their strengths and weaknesses and have a structured revision process. Such writers often require only luck, and there's an old saying about luck: It's when preparedness meets opportunity.
- Surprisingly, talent may be less relevant in determining how close you are to a traditional publishing contract than two other factors: how much time you put into writing and whether you read enough to understand where you lie on the spectrum of quality.
- Indicators will eventually surface if your work has sufficient quality but isn't suited for commercial publication. You might be told that your work is too quirky, has narrow appeal, or doesn't fit the traditional model. These signs indicate that you may need to think about self-publishing or wait for the publishing winds to change.
- Finally, consider the following timeless factors when your revisiting your writing career and making decisions about your next steps forward:
 - What makes you happy? Happiness is the reason you got into writing in the first place. Even if you put it on the back burner to advance other aspects of your writing career, don't leave it out of the equation for long. Otherwise, your efforts can come off as mechanistic or uninspired, and you'll eventually burn out.
 - What earns you money? Not everyone cares about earning money from writing, and writers who are looking to become rich should probably find another field. But as you gain experience, the choices you make in this regard become more important. The more professional you become, the more you

must pay attention to what brings the most return on your investment of time and energy.

- What reaches readers or grows your audience? Sometimes, you'll want to make trade-offs that involve earning less money to grow readership because doing so is an investment in the future. For example, some industry conferences don't pay speakers, but they put you in front of important insiders or influencers in your community.
- In the end, if you believe that you can't stop writing even if someone tells you that it's a waste of time or won't get you a deal, then you're much closer to publication than another writer who is easily discouraged.

Suggested Reading

Kleinman and Lejarde, *The Science of Rejection Letters*.

Orr, *No More Rejections*.

Exercises

1. Visit LiteraryRejections.com to learn how many times classic works and bestsellers were rejected.
2. Visit RejectionWiki.com to read standard rejection letters from a range of publications.

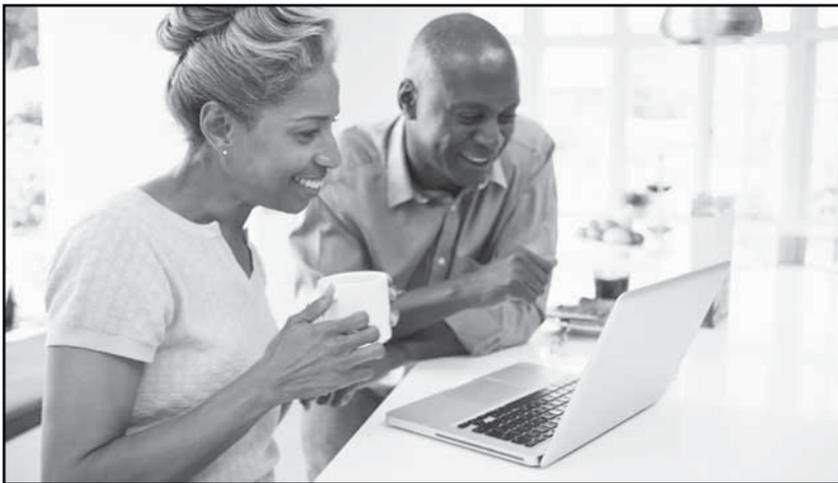
Overcoming Obstacles to Writing

Lecture 17

Without question, it's difficult to continue writing when you receive no recognition or encouragement, but the longer you let rejection consume you, the longer it will take to reach your goals. Happy writers demonstrate resilience; they understand that failure, loss, and rejection are all part of the game. Rejection is also easier to take when you don't believe the cliché that quality bubbles to the top. In fact, great work is overlooked every day, for innumerable reasons. The best remedy to any setbacks you experience is to genuinely love the writing process, to view rejection as a form of growth, and to take advantage of those opportunities for growth that rejection presents.

Inner Conflicts

- An excellent book by Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art*, is a brief guide to dealing with issues of ego and the persistent battle of self-doubt and arrogance inside every writer. Pressfield discusses the significant role that resistance plays in any creative endeavor and the fact that each of us subconsciously engages in self-destructive behavior that prevents us from doing our best work.
- Similarly, in his series on storytelling, Ira Glass notes that the work you produce early in your career simply isn't good. It's trying to be good, but it isn't because you haven't yet attained the skills to be better. And Glass rightly says that many people never get past that phase. Instead of trying to close the gap between what they know is quality work and the quality they're able to produce, they quit.
 - If you can't perceive this quality gap, then you might not be reading enough. The best way to improve your writing skills—aside from writing more—is to read. As you do, you begin to close the gap between the quality you want to achieve and the quality you can achieve.
 - As Glass says, you've got to produce much that is worthless before you can produce something that's respectable. To



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Although you may have the encouragement of family and friends, your motivation to write must come from within.

- have an attitude that carries you the distance, you must avoid defensiveness and protectiveness of your work and be patient with the process.
- You know you're making progress when, looking back, you can understand why your earlier work was rejected, and you believe it deserved rejection. You might even feel embarrassed by your earlier work.
- Another feeling writers commonly face—and must overcome—is aversion to their own work. Every successful writer has experienced this, but it's not a reason to quit. Good writers are always critical of their own work, and they don't necessarily become less critical even as they improve.

A Writer's Dilemmas

- At some point in your path, you must honestly answer three questions for yourself. These are dilemmas that come up repeatedly in the business of publishing and can't be addressed by anyone except the individual writer.

- First, are you creating primarily for yourself or primarily for an audience?
 - Producing work for readers means playing by at least some rules of the industry and caring what others think of your work. For long-term success, you'll need to interact with your audience and be available to them.
 - Creating only for yourself means that you find the act worthwhile regardless of who sees your work and that fulfillment comes from the practice itself, not from making your work public or receiving feedback.
 - Of course, you may be creating for both yourself and a readership. But some writers who say they are producing work for an audience aren't willing to make the sacrifices required to do so. You need to identify what you truly want out of your creative endeavors.
- Second, how much of yourself will you share with readers?
 - Having a readership necessitates some kind of persona or brand. If you're confused by this idea, step back and evaluate why you do what you do. What values or passions drive you to produce your work? When you're able to express your reasons for writing, you're on your way to developing an identity or brand for yourself as an author.
 - As humans, we tend to be most strongly attracted to people who are producing work from a deep place, rather than from a superficial drive to make money or become famous. Look at some of the most remarkable author brands, and you'll often find people who exhibit a strong core belief system throughout their work.
 - Some writers claim not to want to be visible, but the act of publishing is to make something public. It means putting yourself out in the world in some form. And given that you must put something of yourself on display, make it something

you believe in. Consider the qualities of your work that readers love—that make you and your work human.

- Third, what is your killer medium? The book is often assumed to be the most authoritative and important medium, but that's only because of cultural conditioning. Creative people too often pursue this medium because it has been pushed on them by others. Before you devote a great deal of time and energy to conventional book publishing, make sure that's the appropriate medium for your message and goals.

Talent, Skill, and Determination

- Many writers wonder whether they have talent, but the following questions may be more relevant and meaningful:
 - What makes you remarkable? We each have unique strengths and weaknesses—something remarkable to contribute—and some of us are gifted with the knowledge of what those are. If you don't know, keep asking the question.
 - What's your community? Your environment and the people who surround you are important. Relationships often play a role in your career success. Find someone who can serve as your mentor or guide.
 - What risks are you taking? Playing it safe as a writer will lead to mediocre writing at best. If you're not failing, you're not shooting high enough.
 - How do you deal with change? It's certain that the publishing industry will change, and you'll likely face setbacks on your path to publication. Will you resist change or look for opportunities in it?
- Most writers who haven't succeeded and aren't sure if they can succeed like to hear that determination or persistence is more important than talent, while people who've already achieved some stature tend to argue for the importance of talent. In the end, however, there are a number of reasons that talent may not matter.

- Neither talent nor skill is always recognized. There are just too many variables that can stand in the way of recognition, such as your background, upbringing, or education. And some people simply have more opportunities or privileges than others.
- Everyone has some kind of talent, but so what? Your degree of talent is entirely out of your control; thus, to focus on it is fairly useless. If you can't quantify talent and you can't change how much you have, then you're left with doing the work.
- The people who deserve our admiration are those who work hard to do what they believe in. It takes persistence and bravery to overcome great odds or work harder than others to achieve great things.
- Talent is common and does not set you apart as a writer, but that doesn't mean that just being passionate will make up for not having the skill required to put out a great book. What matters is how your passion translates into good work and smart decisions.
 - Writers who hope to smooth the path to publication should learn how to be better at seeking advice on next steps and asking good, specific questions.
 - There are hundreds of instruction books, courses, and videos available on the topics of getting published and self-publishing. Posing questions about these topics to publishing professionals risks disrespecting them.
 - Instead, for any question you face, go as far as you can on your own through research. Then, when you hit a brick wall, ask a specific question of an expert who can advise you on the next step. That's the way to ask a question that gets results.

Finding Time for Writing

- Writing and revising are nothing if not time-intensive. They take you away from paying work, your family, and other activities that you probably enjoy. When you add in all the additional requirements

that writers have to market and promote themselves, it's difficult to understand how anyone has time for these tasks when publishing pays so little.

- The simple truth is that if you're going to commit to writing and publishing, you must decide what you'll stop doing. This isn't discussed nearly often enough. Everyone has projects and activities that probably fall under the rubric of the writing life but have stopped being fun and enjoyable, or aren't pushing you further, or suck up your time without tangible benefit. Sometimes, you have to stop doing things you enjoy to free up time for something more important to making progress. These are tough decisions to make, but if you don't currently have the time you need, you must stop doing something.
- As you plan your writing schedule, decide what meaningful productivity means for you on a weekly basis—perhaps 250 words a day or a chapter a week. Then, figure out how much time it takes you to meet that level of productivity. If the amount of time scares you, you may have been too ambitious. Scale back to a level where you can be disciplined and consistent. Finally, block out sacred time on your schedule to get the work done.
- It's also smart to introduce some structure into your writing life. You can do this by giving yourself daily or weekly creative writing assignments, scheduling and maintaining time for writing that is always focused on the same task, and constructing both a weekly and a daily goal sheet. Make sure your goal sheet has the following sections:
 - Planned accomplishments for the week.
 - Other events that may affect your ability to get things done.
 - A single task that you promise to complete.
 - A “parking lot” where you record things you might forget; this space enables you to free your mind to focus on work.

- Although it's important to have discipline and structure to produce work, you should also maintain self-awareness about whatever processes you set up. Don't get so focused on being as productive as possible that you lose sight of the big picture. When you strive so hard and for so long, the whole reason you started writing in the first place—the real joy and motivation for it—can get completely lost.

Suggested Reading

Lamott, *Bird by Bird*.

Pressfield, *The War of Art*.

Exercises

1. Set a daily or weekly productivity goal for yourself that feels achievable given your day job or other responsibilities. This might be a word-count goal, a page-count goal, or a time-based goal. Firmly commit to this goal for a minimum of three months until you consider readjusting it. Remember that you won't accomplish your goal unless you actually block off time in your schedule for it.
2. Explore the question of what you hope to accomplish through your writing, which is one of the most difficult questions to answer honestly. Try answering this question in 300 words, then cut your response down to 150 words. As a final step, try to reduce it to one sentence. Write this sentence on a sticky note and put it wherever you can see it when you write.

The Book Publishing Contract

Lecture 18

To negotiate a book contract in your best interests, you should have some familiarity with the legal language of publishing. If you have an agent, he or she will be knowledgeable about the contract negotiation process, but if you don't, you might find yourself faced with pages written in opaque language. Either way, it's smart to become familiar with the language and standards common to publishing contracts to ensure that you understand what you're agreeing to when you sign on the dotted line. In this lecture, we'll cover three areas of the contract to which you should pay close attention: the grant-of-rights clause, the reversion-of-rights clause, and the subsidiary rights clause.

Grant of Rights and Reversion of Rights

- The *grant-of-rights clause* specifies the rights that you grant or license to a publisher. The act of granting rights does not traditionally mean giving up your copyright; it simply means that you are giving the publisher permission to publish a specific piece of work under certain circumstances, in certain formats, and for a stated amount of time. The *reversion-of-rights clause* spells out when and how your relationship with the publisher ends, meaning when and how all rights revert to you, the author.
- These two clauses generally apply to one of three basic contract models.
 - The most common model is the *life-of-copyright contract*. This term describes a traditional print book publishing contract, which remains in effect potentially for as long as copyright on the work remains in effect.
 - Another model is the *fixed-term contract*. Such contracts have a set time limit—for example, five years—after which all rights revert to the author. Fixed-term contracts are becoming

more common and make more sense for works sold primarily in digital form.

- The third model is the *work-for-hire contract*, under which the author gives up all rights to the work, including copyright. This type of contract is common if you're a ghostwriter or working on an established, branded series for a publisher or book packager.

Life-of-Copyright Contracts

- Despite their name, life-of-copyright contracts are not expected to last until the copyright expires. Rather, the contract typically remains in effect for as long as sales occur.
- Usually, these contracts ask for publishing rights in all formats and mediums, including hardcover, paperback, mass-market paperback, e-books, audiobooks, and more. An agent may try to retain your rights to some formats and mediums and sell them separately.
- Under these traditional contracts, publishers also usually ask for *world English rights* and the rights to sell your book internationally, as well as rights to sell your work in translation. Before granting such rights, you should find out if the publisher has a track record of selling outside North America.
- Most agents limit the publisher's rights grab as much as possible or specify how long the publisher can exploit certain rights. That way, you can get certain rights back within a short timeframe if the publisher has not sold or made use of them.
- For life-of-copyright contracts, negotiating a clear reversion-of-rights clause is critical. Ideally, you want to arrange for a smooth departure after the relationship has ceased to be advantageous or profitable.
 - An author might want to leave a publisher for a number of reasons, such as the desire to self-publish, lack of marketing or support from the publisher, or the desire to adapt or modify the

work. The desire to terminate may also be connected with how well the book is selling.

- Before e-books, if the publisher wasn't actively printing and distributing the physical book in at least one edition, the author could request a reversion of rights. However, in the age of e-books and print on demand—when any book can be available in perpetuity at nearly zero cost—a publisher can easily keep your book available for sale indefinitely.
- Therefore, it's best to ask for a specific sales threshold that will trigger conditions for you to request reversion of rights. If your book ever sells less than a specific quantity during a 6- or 12-month period or if your royalty payment ever dips below a particular amount, you should be able to request a reversion.

Fixed-Term and Work-for-Hire Contracts

- For a fixed-term contract, the grant-of-rights clause is much the same as it is for a life-of-copyright contract. However, instead of having an indeterminate end date, the publisher's right to publish the work expires at a specific time.
 - A fixed-term contract can be much simpler than a life-of-copyright contract, but you need to make sure that the contract term doesn't automatically renew. If it does, be diligent about contacting the publisher to terminate the agreement if you want to do so.
 - Fixed-term has been the go-to model for e-book publishers, partly because e-books don't really go out of print. Given how fast the e-book landscape is evolving, few authors are willing to tie up their rights for long, especially if the publisher isn't keeping up with the pace of change.
- Authors who agree to work for hire relinquish all rights to the work. In comparison to other contracts, there's not much to negotiate here except compensation, which is typically a flat fee and may include royalties.

Subsidiary Rights

- Most boilerplate contracts allow the publisher to sell your work in many ways other than book form. For example, the contract may grant the publisher merchandising rights, dramatic rights, or translation rights. Collectively, these rights are known as *subsidiary rights*, and they can be exercised by the publisher or licensed to others.
- In granting subsidiary rights, consider the following criteria: (1) the publisher's track record of selling or licensing such rights to everyone's mutual benefit, (2) an appropriate split of sales proceeds, (3) the publisher's willingness to seek your approval on certain types of deals, and (4) whether you or your agent is in a better position to exploit subsidiary rights.
- Among the most common subsidiary rights clauses are territorial, translation, multimedia, dramatic, audiobook, and merchandising rights. Publishers also have additional clauses addressing abridgments, anthologies, reprints, book club sales, and so on.
- Ideally, each subsidiary right in the contract should point to a specific sales or licensing activity that the publisher regularly undertakes. You should strike any catch-all clause that says the publisher will pay you a certain percentage for any rights not specified in the contract.

Other Contract Stipulations

- Be sure to check the contract language regarding how much control you have over your book's title and cover, as well as your responsibilities related to delivering the manuscript or content.
- Few authors are granted the privilege of approval over the book title or cover design, but it is reasonable to request and be granted consultation on these issues.
- Most contracts specify that if the writer fails to submit acceptable work or revisions by a deadline, the publisher may either cancel

the contract or make revisions on the writer's behalf, sometimes without consultation. If you're worried about the publisher revising your work, try to include language in your contract that requires your approval of revisions or allows you to terminate the contract and take the work elsewhere.

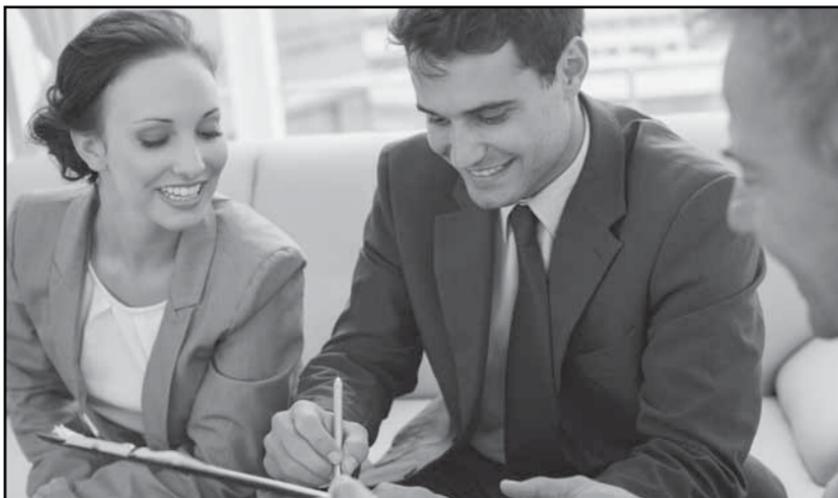
- With book contracts, failure to submit an acceptable manuscript may require you to return any payments made, but sometimes, your agent can negotiate a contract that allows you to keep payments regardless of how, when, or why the contract is terminated. Whether or not a manuscript is considered acceptable is often entirely up to the subjective judgment of the publisher or editor. A good agent will negotiate a narrow definition here, particularly when it comes to revisions. Often, editors are required to write a revision letter, spelling out what changes the author must make to produce an acceptable work.
- The *warranties clause* in a contract requires you to make legal promises about the work. For example, you must guarantee that you haven't granted someone else rights to the work in a way that would interfere with the publisher's rights. You must also promise you've taken reasonable care to ensure that your work is true and accurate and that you haven't plagiarized or violated anyone else's rights by producing the work. If you have any concerns about a potential breach of warranties or liability with your work, consult a lawyer.

Compensation

- When you sign a traditional publishing contract, you receive an *advance against royalties*. As books sell, you earn a percentage of sales for each copy sold (a royalty), which is applied against the advance received. Only once the advance is fully earned do you start receiving royalty payments. Industry insiders estimate that 70 percent of authors do not earn out their advances, but authors do not have to return an advance if the book doesn't earn it.
- The publisher decides what advance to pay you based on a proprietary formula. Its profit-and-loss statement determines

whether a book makes financial sense to publish. The decision takes into account a mixture of predictable costs (such as manufacturing) and predicted sales. Sales estimates are determined by looking at an author's past record of sales, recent performance in the book's genre or category, and so on.

- It's not uncommon for Big Five publishers to offer advances that they know won't earn out. One reason for this is that the standard e-book royalty rate of 25 percent is now widely acknowledged to be too low; however, increasing that rate for one author will set off a domino effect, requiring higher e-book royalties for other authors. If an editor really wants to acquire an author or book but can't increase the royalty rates, then a straightforward way to sweeten the deal is to offer a higher advance.
- Royalties will be clearly outlined in the contract based on format. Authors earn a different rate depending on whether the sales are for hardcover, paperback, or e-book. Royalty rates also change depending on the retail sales channel. On average, you can expect



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Whenever you're presented with a contract, assume that everything is negotiable; don't be shy about asking to modify boilerplate language.

to earn a royalty of somewhere between 6 and 15 percent on the retail price of your book.

- Most book advances are paid in three installments at certain contractually specified events: contract signing, acceptance of the final manuscript, and publication.
- Read the contract for any indication of publication expenses you must bear, either against your future royalty payments or out of pocket. In traditional book deals, authors almost never cover any costs related to publication. However, it's common for nonfiction authors to bear the cost of indexing. If your book includes art, illustration, or photography, you may also cover some or all of those costs. When costs are charged against future royalty payments, you pay nothing out of pocket, but you won't earn anything from book sales until you both earn out your advance and pay for costs charged against your royalty account.

Suggested Reading

Kirsch, *Kirsch's Guide to the Book Contract*.

Exercises

1. Calculate how much you'd earn over the lifetime of your book if it sold 15,000 copies. Use a royalty rate of 15 percent for a hardcover price and 10 percent for a paperback price. (Base your pricing on how bestsellers are currently priced, assuming the same size and format.)
2. Visit the Publishers Weekly website (publishersweekly.com) and look for the weekly report on announced publishing deals, which sometimes include information about advances and terms.

Working Effectively with Your Publisher

Lecture 19

One day it finally happens: Your contract has been successfully negotiated and signed, and you have a manuscript deadline. For first-time authors, it can be one of the most exhilarating days of their lives, but also terrifying when they realize how much they still don't know. Usually, the time from contract signing to having a book on sale is at least one to two years. During that time, you'll journey through several phases with the publisher, including editorial development, design and production, sales and marketing planning, the book launch, and post-launch PR and publicity. In this lecture, we'll look at several aspects of this process.

Writing and Revision

- At the start of the writing and revision process, you'll be assigned an editor who is responsible for reviewing your work and providing feedback. Because this editor serves as your champion for the book inside the publishing house, developing a strong, collaborative relationship can be one of the most important factors in your success.
- Even if you have a completed manuscript at the time of contract signing, you'll almost always be asked to do revisions. Depending on the publisher and the type of book you're writing, you may be asked to make incremental submissions on the way to the final deadline to ensure that you're making sufficient progress.
- When you submit your work for review, especially if it's a first draft, it may take several months for you to receive any feedback. Ask when you might expect to hear back, and don't check on the response until after that time. If you're concerned about the length of time it's taking, ask your agent for guidance. Sometimes, the contract specifies how much time the publisher has to review and respond, as well as how much time the author has to revise after receiving feedback.

- Writers who are new to the business sometimes consider an editor’s requests for revisions to be a personal affront, when in reality, the editor is trying to produce the best possible manuscript for the intended audience. Editors know what works for the market and have the experience and expertise necessary to objectively criticize work. If you don’t want to revise your manuscript to the editor’s style or suggestions—and you could be right—you can always withdraw the work. In worst-case scenarios, your agent should step in to handle any disagreements that threaten to jeopardize the contract or publication date.
- Respect whatever deadlines you are given. If you think you’ll miss a deadline, inform your editor as far in advance as possible and propose a new deadline. The more you communicate about your situation, the more understanding your editor is likely to be. The worst thing you can do is let the deadline pass in complete silence or avoid contact with the editor. Be proactive and professional and work with your editor to ensure that the delay doesn’t have an adverse impact on your book.
- Aside from any revisions the publisher requests, you’ll also need to read the copyedited manuscript, clarify any vague statements or inconsistencies, and respond to any challenges of fact. The turnaround for such responses is typically two to four weeks. Then, you may have to read *page proofs*—the typeset copy—to check for errors. If you wrote an illustrated book, the publisher may have you review the layout and proofread captions.
- If you’re writing nonfiction, you may be responsible for providing an index. Usually, the publisher will hire an indexer at your expense, and the indexing cost appears as a deduction on your royalty statement.

Marketing Planning

- Usually during the late stages of editorial work, the planning process for sales and marketing begins. Your editor is responsible for distributing early versions of your work to the in-house sales and

marketing staff to drum up enthusiasm and support. The editor will also pitch your work during a sales meeting and make suggestions for how the book should be positioned in the market. Decisions will be made regarding your book's format and price at this time.

- Because publishers don't have sufficient money, time, or staff to invest in all the titles they release, it's vital for you to ask questions about the marketing of your work. Most publishers don't have strong direct-to-consumer marketing experience or resources; in other words, they have limited means of directly reaching the target readership. In general, publishers can only hope that a book finds its audience by simply being in stock at stores and discussed in the mainstream media or important review outlets.
- Publishers are known for putting most of their efforts behind A-list authors or books that they're betting will sell big. They will better support a book if it receives an encouraging response or commitment from major retail accounts, such as chain bookstores. Some authors who have been paid a large advance may also be given more support because the publisher has a more significant investment at risk. Unfortunately, all this leaves the majority of authors behind. You should find out early in the process what level of support your book will receive: A-list versus baseline.
- One of the first marketing tasks you'll likely have is the completion of the author questionnaire. This document asks about every facet of your network and platform, including names and contact information for important relationships or professional connections, information about your local and regional media, and more. Be thorough in completing this form. The more the publisher knows about your resources and potential network opportunities, the more it can potentially support your book.
- Out of this questionnaire comes another task for you and the publisher: finding people to blurb your book and, for nonfiction, to potentially write an introduction or foreword. By attaching well-known names to your book, you can add credibility and authority

to your work, especially if you're a debut author. The publisher and your agent will help in securing these endorsements, but they will also expect you to reach out to people you know personally.

- If your publisher is serious about your book gaining traction in traditional publishing circles, it will produce an *advance reading copy* (ARC) about four to six months before your book releases. ARCs are sent to trade review outlets, such as *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Foreword*. These publications are read by booksellers and librarians to help them make decisions on what to order. The ARCs are also sent to all types of publications and media outlets to help secure additional mainstream reviews and coverage.
- Because the costs of book tours often outweigh the benefits, only A-list authors typically receive book tour support. However, you should plan at least one launch event in your region or wherever you think your book will be most well received. Even a small event will spread word of mouth in your community and put you in touch with booksellers, other authors, and people who can help your book get attention.

The Sales Process

- Roughly four to six months before your book is released, the publisher's sales process will begin. This tends to coincide with the release of the seasonal catalog of titles. Make sure to get a copy of this catalog and study your book's positioning.
- The large traditional publishing houses send out sales teams to call on large accounts, including chain and independent bookstores, wholesalers, distributors, and others. They suggest order quantities to each account based on sales of comparable titles in the market, as well as enthusiasm inside the publishing house.
 - By the time the sales call is made, the marketing department has already outlined the most important initiatives the publisher will invest in to spread the word about the book. Advance praise, a large-scale advertising campaign, and forthcoming

media commitments will all be touted as reasons for buyers to commit to strong sales numbers.

- This is why it's important that you as an author communicate what you will do to support your book many months before its release. If your efforts are to have meaning for the initial sales push, the publisher must have them in its plan before the sales call.
- You should be encouraged by signs that your publisher is invested in your book. For example, the publisher may get your book on display at a major retailer or you may be invited to appear with the publisher at an industry event. There's also a chance that you'll be invited to the publisher's offices to talk to the sales and marketing team personally to help build a better relationship, support, and understanding for your work.
- Unfortunately, the majority of authors don't receive special sales treatment, but you can take a number of steps to ensure that your book gets the best possible results.
 - First, come up with a marketing plan that you can execute on your own. As we discussed earlier, you should be able to reach your target audience through existing channels, such as your blog, e-mail newsletter, or social media accounts. Tell the publisher what you plan to do along these lines and identify areas where you might need assistance.
 - If you have an early start—perhaps two years before the book is due to be released—you can establish a greater online presence and develop relationships with both influencers and your target readership. Make a list of publications where you would like your book to be reviewed and start cultivating relationships with those outlets. Build a database of groups or organizations that would be most interested in your work. As you revise your book, think of products, competitions, or giveaways that might complement the work.

- Around the time the sales calls begin, you'll be introduced to the publicist who will work on your book. He or she will likely schedule a phone call with you to talk about the game plan, what media outlets will be targeted, and how to direct your own requests or needs for assistance.
- Once your book releases, most of the work is done. The marketing and publicity plan will be carried out, but most of the media attention you receive will have been put in place weeks or months earlier. After the release date, the publisher will monitor for reviews and other indicators that the book may take off if invested in a bit more. If nothing happens to help the book gain sales momentum in its first three months or so, the publisher will turn its attention to the next season of books. There's always a new book to market and promote in the hopes of it being the next big winner for the publisher.

Suggested Reading

Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*.

Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking like Your Editor*.

Exercises

1. Ask friends who have published a book through traditional means to describe their experience with the publisher and what they wish they'd known going in or what they'd do differently.
2. Visit a large chain bookstore and closely study books that are on display toward the front of the store or on shelf end caps. (This placement has been paid for by the publisher.) What kinds of books and publishers do you see represented?

Becoming a Bestselling Author

Lecture 20

A few years ago, a story broke about an author who hired a marketing firm to launch his book onto *The New York Times* bestseller list—and succeeded. But when the firm’s less-than-honest methods were uncovered, the results were scandal and embarrassment. What were these methods? In simple terms, all it took was rigging enormous sales of the book during a specific timeframe. The author essentially paid the firm to strategically purchase copies of his book in all the right places. Since that scandal broke, it has become harder to game the system, though authors still look for shortcuts or secrets to bestsellerdom. In this lecture, we’ll explore more mainstream ways to achieve that goal.

Overview of Bestseller Lists

- *The New York Times* bestseller list is arguably the most important of such lists because it carries the most prestige and tends to get the most attention and publicity. But it can be the hardest list to hit. It gathers information from many different outlets across the country to determine what titles make the cut, and its sources of information are kept confidential.
- Authors seeking to make *The New York Times* list should note that it is updated weekly; that’s why publishers tend to focus activity on selling the book and scheduling events during the launch week.
- Authors always wonder how many book sales it takes to hit the bestseller list. Unfortunately, that question is unanswerable. Each title competes against numerous others for placement on the list during a particular week. Whether you’ll make the list depends on who you’re up against and how well those titles perform. Still, the number of sales required might be lower than you think. In some categories, you can potentially get on the list with just a couple thousand copies sold.

- Because of the ways in which they're compiled, some people think that bestseller lists are unfair and arbitrary in their focus, but their purpose is to give an accurate reflection of what relatively new titles are being bought and what the general public is currently reading.

Running a Book Marketing Campaign

- It is possible for an author to launch an effective book marketing campaign without a publisher's support or assistance; however, this effort is the equivalent of taking on a full-time job for roughly six months or more, and it usually requires hiring a publicist, PR firm, or marketing consultant to advise and assist you.
- A comprehensive book marketing campaign that results in bestseller status uses a combination of tactics to reach readers. The best approach typically combines online and offline components, and if done right, each amplifies and strengthens the other.
- The first principle in running such a campaign yourself is to concentrate book sales as much as possible within the launch-week window. Your success at achieving this goal largely depends on your online influence. For example, *New York Times*–bestselling author Michael Hyatt literally asked people not to pre-order or buy his book *Platform* until the week of his book launch. But he was able to do this because he had thousands of people reading his blog and receiving his e-mail newsletter, and he offered strong incentives for his readers to wait.

Author Events

- One tactic you can use in your marketing campaign is the author event, which has changed dramatically from the typical reading at a bookstore you may have experienced in the past. Many authors and publicists—as well as bookstores themselves—now plan events in alternative venues, such as bars or clubs. Bookstores and other literary organizations may also sell tickets to author lunches held at restaurants and include a copy of the book with the ticket price.

- Another strategy used by publicists is to partner authors for events and tours because that generally leads to better turnout and a better pitch for media coverage. For instance, one publicist helped several authors organize and promote the Young Authors Give Back Tour, in which four YA authors toured the country and taught writing workshops for teens. That angle got two TV appearances and a feature in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.
- Even if the days of the traditional author tour are over, events still play an important role in visibility and media attention. In fact, media attention is the primary reason authors take the trouble to do events and can sometimes be more important than the number of books sold. Doing an event can be more about making a footprint that leads to greater coverage and new connections, which in turn lead to more opportunities and sales.
- It's important to note that independent bookstores also play a role in turning a book into a bestseller. The American Booksellers Association, a professional organization for independent booksellers, holds regular conventions that are also attended by publishers; some publishers bring along some of their authors who they believe have the potential to break out if supported by the independent bookseller community.
 - The power of *hand-selling*—when bookstore staffs make personal recommendations to their customers—can also play a pivotal role in a new author's success. Such recommendations may be more likely to happen if the booksellers meet the author at an industry convention or otherwise get more personal insight into an upcoming title.
 - For these and other reasons, some authors go out of their way to support independent bookstores as part of a book launch or overall marketing campaign. Some will even adopt an independent bookstore to be their fulfillment center for anyone who wants to find a signed copy. Such relationships help both the bookstore and the book generate more buzz.

- As mentioned earlier, a primary reason to schedule an author event is to help build more media coverage in a particular city or region. Unfortunately, publishing insiders know that the number of media outlets available for such coverage has dramatically shrunk, and the remaining ones are very selective. When you do get a hit in the media, however, it tends to stick with people and make an impact.
 - With persistence, authors can secure publicity or traditional media coverage without their publishers making the call. This effort requires researching media outlets, knowing what they cover, and crafting high-quality pitches that fit the style, tone, and needs of the outlet you're approaching.
 - You must also knock on doors continually with slightly different angles. Even if you hear no, don't stop pitching.

Online Marketing

- One of the greatest challenges for authors is deciding what types of online marketing will work for them strategically based on their starting point, that is, having a large online following versus being an unknown who is unable to score top media attention.
- An e-mail newsletter list is useful for crafting a strategy that you can use in the lead-up to your book's release. If you're like Hyatt and have a strong online presence, you can encourage to people to buy your book via e-mail. If you're a new author and don't have such a list for your first book release, you should start building one through your website and at events.
- Regular blogging isn't necessary to hit a bestseller list, but major blogs and websites can play an important role in spreading word of mouth, which means it can be worthwhile to write guest posts, do interviews, or otherwise try to get featured by bloggers who reach your target audience. It also helps to be an active participant or commenter on blogs that are popular with your readers.
- Often, giveaways can work if done strategically, especially in conjunction with blog interviews and other online appearances.

One popular venue for giveaways is Goodreads, a social media site for books and reading with more than 35 million members. Some authors and publishers offer giveaways of a first book in a series when a new installment is about to launch and enjoy a sales lift across the series after the giveaway concludes.

- If you're struggling to identify online marketing opportunities, examine the activity of authors you admire. What blogs or websites do they appear on? What do they do on social media? What events are they involved in?
- It's also important to be aware of how sales are affected by your online and offline activities. You can do this by tracking your book sales through Amazon Author Central, a free service that allows you to see your Nielsen BookScan numbers—an industry service that tracks individual book sales across most major outlets—and your Amazon sales.



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Online promotions, such as the Kindle Daily Deal, have the power to turn a title into a bestseller overnight.

The Future of Book Marketing

- As breaking out becomes increasingly reliant on metadata and algorithms—the computing equations that drive searches and recommendations on Amazon, Goodreads, and other sites—how relevant will traditional book marketing techniques be to an author’s success? And given that analyzing algorithms is typically an activity even less accessible to authors than publicity and PR, how will the author-publisher partnership evolve to ensure books get discovered by the right readers?
- Traditionally, one of the greatest values publishers have offered authors is the ability to get their books into stores. This value goes beyond simple distribution; bookstore placement acts as a marketing function, particularly when the book is selected for front-of-store display. The more visible a book is, the better the chances a reader has to stumble on it—and the better the chances of that reader talking about it with others.
- However, if fewer people are browsing bookstore shelves, publishers can’t count on the serendipity of the bookstore visitor bumping into a display and taking a chance on a new author. Algorithms and promotions, such as the Kindle Daily Deal, then play an increasingly important role in how readers discover and decide what to read next.
- It’s not clear that publishers are well prepared to face this challenge. Although publishers may be unparalleled in their ability to offer print retail distribution and mass-market branding campaigns, they are still catching up with direct-to-consumer marketing.
- Where does this leave the average author? Probably your smartest move is to build a network that you can reach either online or offline. Don’t underestimate the difference that your relationships can make. If you make connections, when it’s time for your launch or event, you’ll see a real and meaningful effect.

Suggested Reading

Eckstut and Sterry, *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published*.

Exercises

1. Compare three bestseller lists, those of *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and Amazon. What titles appear on all three lists, and what publishers are represented? What titles appear only on one list?
2. Study the main *New York Times* bestseller list every week for a month. How much does its composition change from week to week? What publishers are represented?

Career Marketing Strategies for Writers

Lecture 21

One of the most common disappointments experienced by authors during the traditional publishing process is lack of or perceived lack of marketing and promotion support. In fact, publishers tend to do more to market and promote books than authors realize, but authors should not depend on anyone else to build their brands or expand their direct connections with readers. Your publisher is focused on the short term—its immediate return on investment. You must take care of the long-term career building, which includes taking ownership of your brand and your vision for it and building direct connections with readers. Both of these tasks are like contributing to a retirement account, a long-term investment that pays off over time.

Author Websites

- An essential task for any author today is to establish a website that serves as a hub and information clearinghouse for everything he or she publishes. A website serves as your primary calling card in the digital age. Whatever type of marketing strategy you pursue, it will be more effective with a website in place.
- There's some truth to the belief that a bad website or an out-of-date website can be more damaging than no site at all, but most authors are quite capable of constructing and maintaining sites after being educated properly. Further, no site has to be perfect at launch. Authors can start small and build their skills and presence over time. It may even be worthwhile for an unpublished writer to start a website.
 - Starting a site when you're unpublished helps you get over the learning curve of set-up and maintenance well before you need the site. Building a simple site today should enable you to have a robust and effective one in the future, when it's most important.
 - Also, having a site helps slowly extend brand awareness, especially if you're active on social media or elsewhere online. This tends to be particularly important for nonfiction authors

who are building their authority and reach in order to persuade a publisher to offer a contract.

- Finally, having a site opens up opportunities. You never know who might be looking to contact you or might simply be intrigued by stumbling across your site.
- If you're an unpublished author, your site needs only one or two pages. Include a short bio, mention any credits or media appearances, link to your social media accounts, and briefly describe the type of writing work you do. Don't belabor your unpublished status.
 - Your professional bio should run about 100 to 200 words. You may also include a professional head shot if you have one or another good photo.
 - You might include a tagline or description in your site header that clearly describes your brand or the kind of work you do. For example, novelist CJ Lyons uses the tagline "Thrillers with Heart."
 - Next, you should have a page dedicated to your published or forthcoming books. You might have a separate page for each book or product, or you might combine them. Regardless, don't skimp on the details, and always include links to where your books can be purchased in both print and digital form.
 - Always let readers know where else you're active online. This is important because some visitors may never return to your site. One visit may be your only chance for potential readers and others to find and connect with you on social media—at the moment they're interested.
 - You should also mention notable media coverage, good reviews, testimonials, or a significant following you have on another platform. Such positive attention constitutes *social*

proof; that is, it sends out strong signals that other people have found your writing worthwhile.

- Even established authors are susceptible to a number of common mistakes in constructing websites.
 - For example, some sites have unclear or confusing navigation that makes it hard for new visitors to find what they're looking for. Most statistics show that a website has roughly seven seconds to get its point across; thus, your homepage needs to offer clear paths to the most popular information, such as your most recent publication or current project.
 - Sites that take a long time to load, require special plug-ins, or don't work on all devices frustrate visitors and cause them to leave quickly. Today, most websites receive 30 to 50 percent of their traffic from mobile devices, which makes a mobile-friendly site a near requirement.
 - Finally, don't make it difficult for people to get in touch with you. Offer a contact form, give a specific e-mail address, or provide contact information for your agent, publicist, or publisher.
- Facebook is not an adequate replacement for an author website for a number of reasons. First, although it may be hard to imagine, Facebook may eventually fall out of favor; it's also true that not everyone is on Facebook. Perhaps most important, you can never control what Facebook or any other social media platform does with its design and functionality, its user interface, and your followers. Your insights into your readership are limited to what Facebook itself measures and decides to pass on to you.

Author Blogs

- Unfortunately, many authors receive bad advice about blogging and end up blogging poorly because they believe that a blog is nothing more than a way to increase book sales. In fact, blogging is a great marketing tool, but few people know how to do it well.

- Meaningful blogging requires patience and persistence, as well as a willingness to learn what makes for compelling online-driven or online-only writing. This type of writing is not the same as writing for formal publication or in other genres or mediums—or even for websites other than your own.
- If you have to ask, “What do I blog about?” then you probably shouldn’t be blogging. If the writing is too forced or contrived, your blog may be doomed from the start, or you may not stick with it. But if you approach blogging because it seems as if it would be fun, then it can be incredibly important to your engagement with readers and overall audience growth.
- Once you have a site or blog established, mostly, you need to be patient. Traffic will grow organically as you produce or publish more work. Be sure to link to new blog posts on each social media network where you’re active. With the link, offer an intriguing question, lead-in, excerpt, or explanation of why the post might be interesting to people on that specific social network.



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Google Analytics is a free service that tracks traffic to your website; it shows how people find your site and what pages are most popular.

E-Mail Newsletters

- Your website should also have an e-mail newsletter sign-up to enable you to communicate directly with your audience. But before you start a newsletter, decide on the frequency with which you will publish and stick to it. Your efforts will be more successful if you’re consistent with your timing. Also, keep your e-mails short and structured, and make sure that people understand what they’ll get if they subscribe.

- In the content of your e-mail newsletter, try to provide value or otherwise focus on other people or quality content. For example, her monthly newsletter, author CJ Lyons features a Q&A with another novelist. This offers something appealing to her readers, who are thriller fans; helps out another novelist; and gives Lyons a valuable means of serving her community.
- Aside from a sign-up form on your own website, the only tool you need to start a newsletter is a service that automates the subscription process, stores the subscriber addresses, and archives newsletter issues. Never add a name to your e-mail list unless you are given permission to do so and never sell your readers' information.

Social Media

- Social media is extremely useful for building relationships in the writing community, actively marketing a book, and nurturing reader relationships. Of course, the key benefit that everyone's after with social media is a visible effect on sales. But you'll be successful at marketing through these platforms only if you have built trust and forged relationships on each network.
- Social media is excellent at building awareness of who you are and what you stand for. Over time, you become more visible and identifiable because you show up consistently and have focused messages. It's usually only after this recognition and trust develops that you can run a successful social media campaign that focuses on the sale of a particular book. If you don't have these relationships or trust in place, ask your friends and influencers who do to help spread the word about you.
- Social media typically works best for long-term awareness efforts, relationship building, audience development, and general networking. It is not terribly effective for the hard sell. All the information about why people might like your book—along with the sales pitch—should be on your website.

Other Communications

- When your book is set to launch, brainstorm a list of all the meaningful relationships you have, and divide the list into three groups: (1) people who would probably like to be alerted to your new work, perhaps old classmates or coworkers; (2) people who have significant reach or influence with your target readership; and (3) your existing and devoted fans.
- For the first group, friends and acquaintances, write a brief announcement and include a link to your website for all the book details. For the second group, write a brief, personalized note about your book promotion efforts and offer one to three concrete ways in which your recipient could help, such as tweeting about your book on a specific day. For the third group, your fans, write a general note asking for support in any way they feel comfortable.
- You should also brainstorm a list of all the gatekeepers to your readers with whom you do not yet have a relationship, including specific individuals and websites or blogs. For example, if you write romance, popular romance review blogs are such gatekeepers. Do those blogs accept guest posts? Can you contribute to the community in some way? If you want to grow your readership, you'll have to look beyond your existing network.
- Many times, when an author's marketing efforts fail, it's because the author tried to go it alone. When you see a successful author, what you see may be only the visible aspects of his or her presence or platform. What you can't see are all the relationships and conversations that go on behind the scenes that contribute to a more amplified reach.

Suggested Reading

Grahl, *Your First 1,000 Copies*.

Hyatt, *Platform*.

Exercises

1. Select a few published titles that are similar to your own and visit the authors' websites, as well as the Amazon pages for their books. Look for any and all media attention and publicity received for their work or business relationships that are in play. Study what these authors do on social media to interact with readers and promote their work.
2. Visit the websites of authors whose work you admire. What opportunities do readers have to interact with each author or receive information? What, if anything, does the author offer to readers that's totally free?

The Self-Publishing Path: When and How

Lecture 22

As we've discussed, authors today have more power and control than ever in deciding how and when to publish. Technology has enabled us all to be active creators, publishers, and distributors, without needing the permission or approval of the so-called gatekeepers. This message of empowerment is so strong that authors are beginning to ask why publishers are needed in the first place. What value do they add to the process? In fact, the value added by a publisher depends on your own personality and strengths as an author. In this lecture, we'll begin by discussing the value of publishers; then, we'll talk about specific scenarios in which you may not need that value.

The Value of Traditional Publishers

- One of the primary benefits of working with a publisher is that doing so will help you produce the best possible product that fits well into the marketplace. Publishers have decades of experience in packaging books that sell. They understand how to build off your strengths, while minimizing the appearance of your weaknesses.
- In addition, it's useful to have someone to tell you when something isn't working. Most people don't have the gift of being so distant from their work that they can see where it's succeeding or failing. To develop to your maximum potential, you need someone to create a little discomfort.
- The bottom line is this: If you want to compete in an increasingly crowded marketplace, you need the most professional quality possible. Although it's true that publishers can put out low-quality work, they're far more consistent in the quality they achieve than what you find across the majority of authors who self-publish.
- Not every author has the time—or wants to spend time—learning about and administering the self-publishing process and finding

assistance they can trust. For some writers, having a publisher frees them to focus on other aspects of the writing, marketing, and promotion process.

Goals of Self-Publishing

- Self-publishing most frequently enters the conversation when writers have experienced a “near miss” with a publisher or the traditional submission process has failed to produce an acceptance. In other words, self-publishing is often seen as a last resort, rather than the first and best option.
- Before you commit to self-publishing, identify your primary goal for doing so. This goal will affect what service you choose, how much money you spend, what format you use, and how satisfied you are at the end of the process. Three common goals are to experience the satisfaction of seeing your work in print, to strengthen expertise and visibility for nonfiction authors, and to prove the gatekeepers wrong.
 - If your primary goal is to see your work in print form, then the key question is: How much help or service do you need or want to make that happen? It is possible to write a check, hand over a Word document, and get a printed book in your hands very quickly. Many full-service publishing providers offer a range of packages to choose from, with the average cost somewhere between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Just don’t expect any sales to come from this effort.
 - A common goal for nonfiction authors is to maintain visibility in a specific field or profession. Self-publishing can be especially helpful to those who speak often, have a ready audience, and are existing authorities in their field. Such authors should avoid full-service providers because they collect royalties on every book sold. Instead, these authors should contract out all services or hire a professional to manage the process. This ensures that the author controls all property, rights, and profits after the book is finished.

- Many who self-publish harbor a secret goal of proving the gatekeepers wrong. These authors hope that once their work is in print, those who rejected them earlier will see their success and now want to sign them.

Deciding to Self-Publish

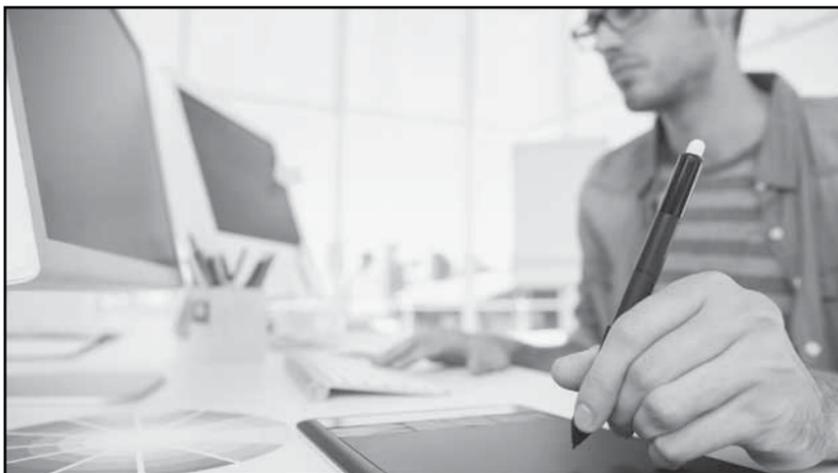
- Despite all the success stories, few authors make a living from their self-published work or go on to traditional book deals. If you envision yourself as a thriving independent author, you need to also see yourself as a long-term entrepreneur. You'll need marketing experience—or a willingness to acquire some—and the time to be active online, because most of your sales will be through online retailers.
- It's generally ill-advised to self-publish if you don't have a strong idea of who your readers are, if you don't have any online presence, or if you're hoping to get lucky. Many self-published authors hope to go on to a traditional deal, but if they couldn't interest a larger publisher in a book before it was self-published, they're unlikely to find a buyer afterward, unless they rack up significant sales on their own.
- It's also true that there is still a stigma attached to self-publishing. Most traditional media outlets will not review or consider self-published books for editorial coverage. It may also be difficult to find a marketing or publicity person to work with you. With a self-published book, you must build credibility on your own, and in the process, you will battle against a number of preconceived notions about the quality of your work.
- That said, there is an active community of self-published, independent authors who are ready to share their strategies and tactics to help newcomers. If you're diligent in following best practices, approach the process with an entrepreneurial spirit, and feel committed to producing books on your own for years to come, you may become a success story.

Self-Publishing Services

- The self-publishing industry was revolutionized in the late 1990s by the advent of print-on-demand (POD) technology, which allows books to be published one at a time. Nearly every self-publishing service uses this technology to create, sell, and fulfill orders for print editions. This eliminates the need for inventory and warehousing, not to mention the risky investment in a print run that might not sell. It also explains why self-published books are almost never stocked in bookstores; copies are printed only when they've already been purchased.
- The self-publishing approach that's been around the longest is the formal full-service publishing provider, better known by the derogatory term *vanity press*. Such services will publish your book in whatever formats you want, but they take a significant cut of your profits.
- If you want a full-service approach with better earnings potential, you can look for companies that help you produce your book strictly on a work-for-hire basis, meaning that they earn no royalties off your sales. However, these services tend to be far more expensive than the other type of provider because they're more personalized and focused on quality.
- If you're comfortable with very little to no service, you can use the major services that distribute POD specifically for self-published authors, such as Amazon's CreateSpace and IngramSpark. With these services, which are virtually free, you can often see your book for sale at major online retailers in as little as 48 hours.
- This entire process becomes simpler if you plan to self-publish and distribute your book only in e-book format. E-book services typically fall into two categories.
 - First, there are retailer-specific distribution and sales services that are 100 percent free to use, such as Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing. As an author, you work directly through a self-service interface to make your work available for sale almost

instantly. It's as simple as opening an account, uploading your book files, and pushing the "Publish" button.

- Also available are e-book distribution services, such as Smashwords. They offer a centralized site to upload your work, which they then push out to all the major online e-book retailers. Some e-book distributors charge an upfront fee, while others take a percentage of your sales.
- Understand that these services are not publishers. They are distributors and retailers. They take no responsibility for the quality of your work, but neither do they take any rights to your work. You use these services on an at-will basis. If you decide you've made a mistake in publishing your e-book, you can remove it from availability as quickly as you uploaded it.
- When using an e-book retailer or service, keep the following pointers in mind:
 - First, check to see if the retailer or service is exclusive or nonexclusive. Most work on a nonexclusive basis, which means that you can sell your e-book at many different retailers at once.
 - Second, you should always be in control of the price. Although some retailers may have reasonable pricing restrictions, such as not allowing you to price below \$0.99, the standard practice is to give the author complete control over pricing. However, most e-book retailers mandate that you not offer more favorable pricing elsewhere.
 - Third, you should always understand how much money you'll earn on each book sale. For example, Amazon Kindle offers you 70 percent of your book's list price as long as you price between \$2.99 and \$9.99. If you price outside that range, you'll earn 35 percent.
 - Fourth, make sure you understand how much freedom you have to make changes to your e-book after it goes on sale. Retailers



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Because the cover of your book is often your number-one sales tool, especially for online sales, make sure you hire a professional designer to create it.

generally allow you to upload revised files as often as you like, but distributors may require you to pay a fee to make changes.

- Finally, check what formats are required from you. Most retailers allow you to upload a Word document, which is then automatically converted into whatever format is needed. Most services offer guidelines and preview programs to ensure that your e-book looks good before it goes live.

Professionalism in Self-Publishing

- Two mistakes commonly made by self-publishing authors are not hiring a professional editor to review your work line by line and not hiring a professional designer to create your book cover.
- Further, if you want to tackle self-publishing in the most professional way possible, you should establish a small press. Give this press a name, even if you'll be publishing only your own work. You will use this press name when you self-publish through online retailers, on the copyright page of your books, and anywhere else the name of the publisher is seen or requested.

- As part of this process, you should buy your press its own set of ISBNs, which are the industry-standard identification numbers for books. If you want your book to have any chance of being stocked or distributed in a retail environment, this number is required.
- You might also look into two final self-publishing models: self-publishing with an agent's assistance or partnering with a publisher. Both approaches may give you the benefit of assistance from industry insiders, but they also involve some costs. Make sure you carefully research such arrangements and understand their terms before you reach an agreement with either an agent or a publishing partner.

Suggested Reading

Kawasaki, *APE: Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur*.

Levine, *The Fine Print of Self-Publishing*.

Exercises

1. Visit Smashwords, an online retailer of many thousands of self-published e-books. Look at the bestselling titles in your category or genre (filtered by most units sold), then search for those same books at other retailers. How well distributed are these books? How many formats are they available in? Where can they be ordered? Where do these books seem to have the most reviews or the highest ranking? Do they have ISBNs, and how are they priced? Also study the authors' websites. How do they appear to be marketing and promoting their work? How many titles have they published? How active are they on social media?
2. Brainstorm several keywords that readers might use to search Amazon if they wanted to find a book like yours, then search Amazon using those keywords and see what titles turn up. How many are self-published versus traditionally published? (You can often identify self-published titles on Amazon because the publisher is listed as CreateSpace or Amazon Digital Services, although this is not always the case.)

Principles of Self-Publishing Success

Lecture 23

In an earlier lecture, we discussed the ways in which books are launched onto bestseller lists. We also noted that the time-honored ways to generate word of mouth for books, such as bookstore signings and media coverage, don't work as well as they used to. The digitization of reading and publishing has changed the rules about what generates word of mouth. Another unintended consequence of the rise of the digital marketplace is that the book launch itself may be outdated. Many independent authors have noted that launch sales can be disappointing compared to what happens once a book gains traction around online reviews and reputation. In this lecture, we'll discuss how these changes translate into tactics for self-publishing success.

Optimizing Books for Online Sales

- One of the main issues in optimizing books to be seen and discovered online is metadata comprehensiveness and strategy. In general, *metadata* refers to everything that is not the content itself but how that content is described and classified.
 - For example, the original form of metadata in publishing was the book jacket. Now, it's the information and keywords on a book's product page on a retailer's website. Selecting what information to include there requires the same care and attention as the cover.
 - Metadata includes such information as cover image, author bio, excerpts, reviews, region codes, prizes or awards, target audience, table of contents headings, and more. One industry study showed that when a book's metadata is improved, online sales can lift by as much as 28 percent.
- It's impossible to know exactly what goes into the secret sauce of any retailer's algorithm or how those algorithms will change over time, but most digital marketing is focused on helping algorithms "see" books better. In online retail environments, this basically

means that keywords drive the discoverability and visibility of your book. Keywords relevant to your book's theme or topic must be included in the metadata, as well as in excerpts and reviews.

- The first step in identifying appropriate keywords is to choose the right category for your book, particularly on Amazon. For example, on Amazon, you might choose: Women's Fiction > Single Women. Because every category or genre is surrounded by certain expectations—for example, a romance should have a happy ending—the category you choose should be a good fit to avoid disappointing readers. If you're unsure about the categories, check those for several books that are similar to yours.
- The second step is to identify the best keywords to describe your work. A *keyword* is a word or phrase associated with the characters, themes, or ideas in your book. The tricky part is to identify keywords that your readers will actually use to search online. Before you publish your work, brainstorm a list of words and phrases that might be associated with it. Also ask editors, family members, and others who've read the manuscript to suggest keywords.
- Next, test your keywords by searching for them on Google and Amazon. This step works as a kind of verification of the language people use when searching. Pay special attention to the auto-complete feature of Amazon and Google, which will attempt to “guess” what you're searching for. These guesses can provide helpful clues about how people conduct searches in your category. Also, when using Google, check the bottom of the results page to find similar terms that people have used to search for your topic.
- In almost all cases, specificity is good, and vague or generalized terms are bad. For example, “family relationships” could pertain to many different types of stories, but “father-daughter relationships” is much more specific and better for a search.
- Once you settle on keywords that make the most sense, you'll use these when you upload and publish your book to Amazon

and other retailers or distributors. You should also use the keywords in the book description that customers read. The goal here is to have keywords that match for the title (for nonfiction), for the description, and behind the scenes in the keywords metadata box.



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Your Amazon page may be the first and only one a reader looks at when deciding whether to purchase your book; make sure you provide a full description of the book and complete your author profile.

Pricing and Giveaways

- Independent novelists tend to charge very little for their work online, usually between \$0.99 and \$2.99. Many believe that these low prices encourage readers to take a chance on unknown fiction writers. In contrast, nonfiction authors should price according to the competition and what the market will bear. Sometimes, prices in nonfiction categories are just as high for digital editions as print editions.
- When you begin the process of selling your book online, you'll be asked whether you want to enroll in Amazon's KDP Select program, which requires you to sell exclusively through Amazon for 90 days. If your readers buy a significant number of your books from other retailers, you probably aren't interested in this program, but if you have no readers yet, then building an audience on Amazon before branching out to other venues might be a good idea.
 - If you commit to the KDP Select program, Amazon will give you 5 giveaway days out of the 90 days you're enrolled. Giveaways are well-known to boost sales and visibility of your book even after they end, and it's impossible to offer giveaways on Amazon unless you're enrolled in this program.
 - The KDP Select program also allows your book to become available as part of the Kindle Owners' Lending Library, as well as Kindle Unlimited, the Amazon e-book subscription service.

You get paid each time someone borrows your book through these services, and the pay can be roughly equivalent to a sale.

- On the subject of giveaways, some people believe that they create misleading expectations among readers (that all your books will be free) or cultivate the wrong type of reader (one who wants only a cheap read). Of course, like any promotion, giveaways can result in both good and bad leads. Strategic authors learn over time how and where to use the giveaway incentive to increase the number of high-quality leads they receive.
 - The giveaway can be a powerful tool because it's a way to get attention when there is not yet any demand for your work. Especially if you have no publisher backing you, then it's important to provide social proof to potential readers or give them an indication of the merit of your work before they invest in it.
 - With giveaways, independent authors may run into trouble if they have only one or two books to sell and nothing else to offer readers or if they don't establish any means to contact readers in the future, whether via e-mail newsletter or social media. The other catch is that the quality of your work must match the expectations of your audience. If it doesn't, no amount of giveaways will help you.
 - Whether you use KDP Select or not, giveaways can be an effective part of a larger marketing strategy. But before you use them, make sure you understand your reader funnel and the demand curve for your work.

Garnering Reviews

- In addition to leading to visibility and new readers, giveaways can also result in more reviews for your work, and getting a good number of reviews early on can tip the scales in your favor. Although no one knows what the Amazon algorithm favors, most authors see that once they have around 60 to 70 reviews, the visibility of their books on Amazon is improved. It's also well-known that readers make buying decisions based on the content of reviews.

- One method of encouraging reviews is to enroll in the KDP Select program. Another option is to do a giveaway on Goodreads, a social media site for books and reading with more than 35 million members. Goodreads is favored by both traditional publishers and self-publishers for getting the word out and generating pre-publication buzz. The drawback is that Goodreads gives away physical books only, which requires a small investment from the author and won't work at all for authors who are publishing only in e-book format.
- A more e-book-friendly solution is to use an e-mail marketing service that targets readers looking for cheap or free reads, such as BookBub. Any author can submit work to BookBub to be considered for inclusion in e-mail promotions to readers, as long as the book can be downloaded from a major retailer and is offered for free or at a major discount. If your book is accepted for promotion, you'll be charged a fee based on a variety of criteria. This type of promotion can lead to a wave of new reviews on Amazon or Goodreads.
- Finally, the old-fashioned way of getting book reviews is to go door-to-door and ask for them. Several major online directories, including the Book Blogger Directory and The IndieView, list book reviewers and book bloggers that you can pitch for review coverage. You can also try contacting reviewers in Amazon's Vine program, which is a group of people hand-selected by Amazon as among the best reviewers on the site.

Releasing New Work

- Both publishers and successful authors know that writing and releasing a new work is one of the best and most reliable marketing tools for boosting sales of previous and future books. This phenomenon can be so pronounced that successful authors have counseled beginners to all but stop marketing efforts and, instead, focus on producing new work.

- This is probably the most boring advice possible, but the truth is seldom glamorous. Few authors want to hear that the way to build their career is to work hard for a long time. Although you may want to find readers for the book you already have instead of writing a new one, the painful reality is that if you're a self-publishing author who only ever writes one book, your chances of succeeding with it in a meaningful way are very low.
- Authors who are advanced in their self-publishing strategies tend to develop long-term series, with each release building on the characters and tension in the previous books and creating an irresistible hook for readers. We can see an interesting parallel in the binge-watching that's now common with TV series available on demand. Authors tap into the same kind of addictive potential by building out a story arc over a number of books.
- Having more books out there also aids in generating more word of mouth. You'll have more readers telling their friends that they absolutely must read your books. But the first step is to write books that are worth sharing. Reading is a significant investment of time, and accepting a book recommendation is, therefore, an act of trust. Most people will suggest only those books that give readers an excellent experience, not just an interesting story.

Suggested Reading

Gaughran, *Let's Get Visible*.

Penn, *How to Market a Book*.

Truant and Platt, *Write. Publish. Repeat*.

Exercises

1. Look at the Amazon Kindle bestseller list; you'll notice it's divided into free titles versus paid titles. Look at some of the free titles and try to find some in your category or genre. Download and sample at least one of them. Is there another book by this author for readers to buy next? Does the author ask you to sign up to receive another free book? What strategies does the author use to make the most of the giveaway, if any?
2. Sign up for the free BookBub e-mail newsletter in your category or genre and study the discounting and giveaway strategies being used.

Beyond the Book: Sharing Ideas in the Digital Age

Lecture 24

For hundreds of years, the book has been the primary vehicle for sharing knowledge and authority, and to some extent, it still is. But for sharing ideas, telling stories, or wielding influence, authoring a book is only one tool or method available to us today—and not always the best one. We now have the best speakers and thinkers lecturing through YouTube and online courses, in-depth reporting delivered through multimedia websites and blogs, and on-demand, professionally produced podcasts. For this reason, it's important to consider the story or message you wish to share, rather than focusing on the container; there are many ways besides a book to write, publish, and share ideas in the digital age.

The Book in the 21st Century

- It's not true that the book is dead, but the ways in which the book has traditionally been sold and distributed are on the way out. By the end of 2012, nearly half of U.S. book sales—including both print and digital books—were made through online retailers, particularly Amazon. Large chain bookstore sales used to dominate the market, but their share is now less than one-fifth of all book sales in the United States.
- In discussing the future of publishing, it's important to separate the future of the book itself from the future of writing, reading, and literacy.
 - Many people value long-form reading and the experience of deep immersion in a book. But the number of heavy readers who avidly consume books has always been a minority of the total population. Most studies show that we read as much as we ever did, but what, where, and how we read are changing.
 - Pew Research shows steadily increasing adoption of mobile and tablet devices in the United States, and mobile-driven media consumption is far higher in other parts of the world.

Regardless of what you are writing or publishing, to be successful for the long term, a mobile strategy must be part of the equation.

- Despite these fundamental changes, another myth we need dispel is that publishers are going away. It's simply not true that there is no longer any value in traditional publishing. But that doesn't mean that there won't be further consolidation among publishing houses and a continued evolution of the business model.

The Future of Nonfiction

- For the foreseeable future, we will experience a revolution in how we find, use, and share information. On the most practical level, authors who understand when and how a book is needed or valuable for their audience will have a leg up on the competition.
- In particular, for nonfiction authors, the book simply cannot be the end of what you offer. Agents and editors want to see that a book is just one aspect of your much larger purpose and strategy for serving an audience.
- Publishers who specialize in reference already understand that some books are too expensive to produce for how fast they go out of date and how easily the same information can be found for free online. Thus, some nonfiction publishers have stopped talking about books and now focus on *content strategy*, recognizing the need to deliver information in adaptable forms through different channels, formats, and environments.
- Going even further, the CEO of one large educational publisher has said that his company's job is not to deliver information or content but to develop services. By that, he means servicing universities, students, and professionals with online courses, assessment, workflow tools, communities, and of course, digital books.

The Future of Fiction

- Publishing futurists tend to draw a line between the future of novels and other forms of narratives and the future of non-narrative books. If you're working in a non-narrative format, you tend to compete against multimedia offerings that didn't exist even a few years ago. If you're working in narrative-driven publishing, such as fiction, then you tend to focus more on the ways in which the digital age is changing how those stories are discovered and consumed by readers.
- Significant questions have arisen regarding how readers interact with digital books and whether the reading and writing process will become more social. For example, Bob Stein, founder of the Institute for the Future of the Book, argues that as we move from the printed page to the screen—to networked environments—the social aspect of reading and writing moves to the foreground. Once this shift takes place, the lines begin to blur between reader and writer. Stein suggests that authors will take on added roles as moderators of communities in nonfiction and designers of complex worlds for readers to explore.
- A related topic here is the idea of *transmedia*—a term from the entertainment world. It focuses on the story world first and the methods of distribution second. *Star Wars* might be considered transmedia—something that spans film, TV, books, video games, merchandise, and more—but of course, it didn't start out that way. The most progressive people in media are looking at how stories can be established and evolve without putting any one medium first but, instead, growing or adapting the story in different ways across many channels.
 - For example, recently, a group of writers collaborated to produce a serialized story that was released over a period of six months through an iPhone app. Readers could contribute to the story during that period and use their phones to unlock new chapters.
 - We may slowly be moving into an era that embodies an entirely new concept of what an author is and does. Rather than

being solitary creators, authors may become moderators or collaborators who synthesize and express many people's ideas.

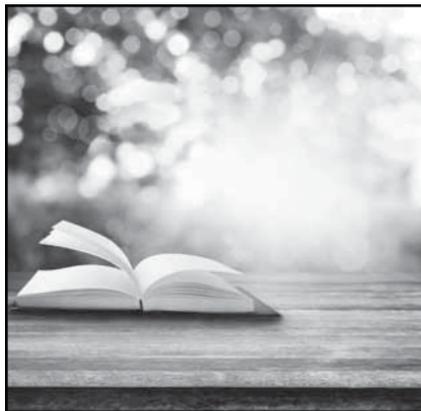
- One area where we find a strong social component and collaboration in writing and reading is in the fan fiction community, where readers create new stories based on well-known characters and story worlds. Fan fiction enthusiasts and other writers congregate in online communities, such as Wattpad, where they often post stories in serialized form.
 - One of the reasons that Wattpad is attractive to young writers is that it offers a chance to directly reach and grow a readership, even if it means giving away the writing for free. Wattpad is able to ping a devoted readership whenever a new story or installment is posted.
 - Unlike traditional publishing or even self-publishing, in which authors have limited insight into their readers and no means to interact with them, Wattpad offers a platform for ongoing conversation. And Wattpad's larger vision is just that: to foster a stronger connection between the reader and writer.

The Future of the Author

- Although serials and fan fiction are sometimes dismissed by industry insiders as low-quality work that won't affect traditional publishing, others have begun to speculate that these markets might be in a position to do exactly that. These sites deliver a social reading experience that's already much better than the traditional e-book experience. They feature stories in smaller and more addictive chunks and offer better integration into pop culture. And the authors are responsive to their readers.
- More than a few people see such developments as a threat. The extent of the danger, however, depends on the goal of the writer. If the goal is sales and long-term readership growth, there might not be any harm at all. But if interacting with readers impedes the writer from pursuing his or her primary purpose, then the call to engagement may be detrimental. This, in fact, has been

the conclusion of many “literary” authors, or those who see their purpose as producing something that goes beyond entertainment.

- Some serious writers argue that distance is the writer’s friend and that mystery plays a significant role in our love of books. Writers who engage more with readers are overexposing themselves and demystifying their work for everyone who follows them. What will become of the authors who hold this philosophy?
- It seems that our culture’s concept of authorship is destined to change. As thought leaders in publishing have pointed out, the concept of the author as an original genius is a fairly recent one that came into being with the printing press and copyright. The digital era likely entails a new type of authorship, one that is built on resampling, remixing, and collaborating. Authors may evolve to be leaders, moderators, and synthesizers of information, rather than dictators in control of it.
- Another facet of this is the idea that we now live in a time of universal authorship, in which anyone and everyone can write for public consumption. Although that might not mean writing a book for publication, it includes commenting, blogging, posting updates on social media, and being active in online communities.
 - This has resulted, predictably, in a deluge of free and cheap information and entertainment options. Of course, the quality varies tremendously, but still, people have more good things



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Writing today and in the future will encompass many possible models—beyond the book—for creating stories and sharing information.

to read, watch, or otherwise consume than they could possibly need. Thus, the challenge becomes how to be more visible, valuable, or attention-grabbing than the next person.

- For this reason, authors who are more engaged and responsive may have more options, freedom, and success in the future. There's enough choice and community out there that most of us have only the time and money to devote to things we can feel a part of, or believe in, or simply can't get anywhere else.
- Authors will become known and be supported through many paths. Those with business savvy will be successful on their own. Others will have productive partnerships with publishers, editors, agents, or managers. Some authors will be known for making a living through their stories alone, while others will capitalize on value-added or digital media endeavors. And another segment will continue writing without the expectation that their art should sustain a living.
 - A new generation of authors is coming—a generation of those who enjoy the act of creating things across mediums and aren't tied to the book form. They will use visuals, be proficient with code, and enjoy crafting a range of experiences.
 - You don't have to wait for someone to validate you before trying something new. You can reach your readers directly and experiment with how to deliver your story. The world of publishing now has so many new tools, services, and distribution methods, with low or no start-up costs, that your only limit is your imagination.

Suggested Reading

Bhaskar, *The Content Machine*.

McGuire and O'Leary, eds., *Book: A Futurist's Manifesto*.

Nash, "The Business of Literature."

Exercises

1. Watch the first 10 minutes of Simon Sinek's well-known TED talk "Start with Why." If your book is the "what," then what is the "why" behind it? In what other ways might your "why" be expressed, aside from a book?
2. Jot down the names of several authors whose books you read without fail. Then, research whether their work takes any other shape or form. How else do their messages manifest themselves in the world? For example, nonfiction author Alain de Botton founded The School of Life to bring philosophy into the daily lives of people. Novelist Hugh Howey allows fan fiction writers the freedom to publish stories derived from his work without fear of copyright infringement.

Online Resources for Writers

Source	Description	URL
“279 Days to Overnight Success”	One writer’s personal story of becoming a successful blogger	chrisguillebeau.com/files/2009/04/279days.pdf
AAR Online	Site of the Association of Authors’ Representatives	aaronline.org
AgentQuery.com	Free database listing about 900 literary agents	agencyquery.com
Association of Writers and Writing Programs	Organization serving a community of nearly 500 writing programs; members receive special access to a mentorship program, job board, and opportunities for grants and awards	awpwriter.org
Authonomy	Online manuscript critique forum sponsored by HarperCollins	authonomy.com
Author Central	Provides data for tracking book sales in advance of the on-sale date	authorcentral.amazon.com
Authors Guild	National professional organization of book and magazine writers; provides information on standard book and magazine contracts	authorsguild.org
Book Blogger Directory	Lists book bloggers that you can pitch for review coverage	bookbloggerdirectory.wordpress.com

Source	Description	URL
Book Country	Online manuscript critique forum and self-publishing service provider	bookcountry.com
BookBub	E-mail marketing service that targets readers looking for inexpensive or free books	bookbub.com
Bowker Identifier Services	Official U.S. ISBN agency	myidentifiers.com
CreateSpace	Amazon's print-on-demand distributor for self-published authors	createspace.com
Duotrope	Paid database service; offers an updated listing of about 5,000 markets and an extensive list of nonpaying markets	duotrope.com
Editorial Freelancers Association	Professional association for freelance editors, writers, indexers, and other document specialists; provides information about rates and freelance agreements	the-efa.org
Goodreads	Social media site devoted to books and reading with 35 million members	goodreads.com
GrubStreet	Nonprofit organization in Boston that offers writing classes, manuscript consultants, and more	grubstreet.org
Guide to Literary Agents	Blog featuring posts about new agents, book marketing, and more	writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents

Source	Description	URL
<i>The Independent Publishing Magazine</i>	Reviews and discusses new self-publishing and digital services for writers	theindependentpublishingmagazine.com
The IndieView	Lists independent online reviewers that you can pitch for coverage	theindieview.com
IngramSpark	Print-on-demand distributor for self-published authors	ingramspark.com
Kindle Direct Publishing	Retailer-specific e-book distribution and sales service	kdp.amazon.com
Kindle Scout	Amazon's crowdsourced publishing program	kindlescout.amazon.com
Kristin Nelson	Agent website that includes a blog offering "polite rants about queries, writers, and the publishing industry"	nelsonagency.com/kristin-nelson
Literary Rejections	Online support hub to help writers persevere through rejection; includes a database of submission policies for more than 300 agencies	literaryrejections.com
The Loft Literary Center	Nonprofit organization in Minneapolis that offers writing classes and hosts literary events	loft.org
Manuscript Wish List	Twitter list of what agents and editors are seeking	#MSWL or mswishlist.com

Source	Description	URL
<i>Poets & Writers</i>	Bimonthly magazine focused on the literary publishing community; maintains a database of opportunities for writers, especially those seeking grants, residencies, and prizes for their work	pw.org
Publishers Marketplace	Service for publishing industry professionals; offers a weekday newsletter, <i>Publishers Lunch</i> ; job board; member database; and deals database	publishersmarketplace.com
QueryTracker.net	Database of more than 1,000 agents plus publisher listings	querytracker.net
Rachelle Gardner	Agent blog, offering advice for new authors, tips for finding an agent and getting published, and much more	rachellegardner.com
Rejection Wiki	Posts standard rejection letters from a range of publications	rejectionwiki.com/index.php?title=Literary_Journals_and_Rejections
Scott Berkun	Blog of a bestselling author and popular speaker on creativity, culture, business, and other subjects; check out his post “28 (Better) Things No One Tells You about Publishing”	scottberkun.com
Scribophile	Online manuscript critique forum	scribophile.com

Source	Description	URL
<i>Script</i> magazine	Source for writers of film and television scripts	scriptmag.com
Shaw Guides	Searchable database of upcoming writing conferences and workshops	shawguides.com
<i>Shelf Awareness</i>	Free daily e-newsletter for booksellers	http://www.shelf-awareness.com/
Smashwords	E-book publisher and distribution service	smashwords.com
Society for Editors and Proofreaders	Professional association for editors and proofreaders in the United Kingdom	sfep.org.uk
Submishmash	Lists potential creative opportunities available for writers and artists	submishmash.com
Submittable	Industry-wide standard online submission system	submittable.com
Wattpad	One of the most popular community sites for posting writing in serialized form	wattpad.com
<i>The Writer</i>	Monthly magazine that offers how-to information related to the craft and business of writing	writermag.com
Writer Beware	Hub for writers who have concerns about any publisher, service, or organization in the writing community	sfwa.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware

Source	Description	URL
<i>Writer's Digest</i>	The most widely circulating how-to magazine for writers; also publishes instruction books and market guides, offers online education, and puts out an annual round-up of the 101 best websites for writers	writersdigest.com
<i>Writer's Market</i>	Longest continuously published market listings guide; website includes more than 9,000 market listings, articles on writing, and more	writersmarket.com
Writers Guild of America	Labor union for film and television scriptwriters and writers involved in new media (e.g., Internet work and mobile phone apps)	wga.org (Writers Guild, West) wgaeast.org (Writers Guild, East)

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Sambuchino, Chuck, ed. *2016 Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 2015.

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These informational directories on how and where to get your work published have been updated and released annually in one form or another since 1920. The oldest and most important one is *Writer's Market*, which covers all paying markets in both book publishing and magazine publishing. For fiction writers, *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market* is a more comprehensive, focused listing that includes smaller presses and literary journals that may pay very little or even nothing. *Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market*, as its name implies, is specifically for writers seeking to publish anything in the juvenile market, from picture books to young adult novels. *Poet's Market* lists all places to publish individual poems, as well as full collections. The *Guide to Literary Agents* lists hundreds of literary agents, mostly those based in the United States and United Kingdom.

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