

Walking the Traditional Path

Monumental changes have taken place in the world of traditional publishing. The majors—names you will recognize immediately like HarperCollins (a division of Murdoch News Corp), Penguin, Time Warner—have become huge corporations with numerous imprints. As retirees, most of us are aware of these changes that have taken place during our lifetime.

The German publisher Bertelsman Book Group, a name you may not know as intimately, has swept through the ranks of American publishers swallowing up household names like Bantam Books, Random House, Knopf, Doubleday and more.

Today, authors are forced to deal with profit-oriented publishers whose bottom line concerns far override questions of literary excellence, diversity and the other elements that once dominated this quality-oriented industry.

Fortunately, a number of smaller independent publishing houses continue to thrive and to maintain the standards of yesteryear. This segment is “sizable and growing with surging numbers,” according the Book Industry Study Group. That should be reassuring to authors, both new and experienced.

What Makes It Different?

Traditional Publishing differs from other methods in many ways. The author is totally dependent on the participation of a publisher and in most cases a literary agent. It therefore becomes a “joint venture.”

The process begins with the effort to find an agent, and that's often as difficult as, or even harder than, finding a publisher. It can also be a risky venture, for sadly too many rogue agents exist to fleece unsuspecting beginners.

As highly respected agent Peter Rubie writes in his excellent book *Writer's Market* FAQs, "If the agent has to earn his living by charging the author such things as reading fees and editorial services, there is an inherent conflict of interest. Don't go near him. Reputable agents, with one or two exceptions, don't charge reading fees, nor do they provide reader's reports...(They) make their living from the commissions they earn selling a writer's book."

The best advice for protecting yourself from these charlatans is to select only agents who are members of AAR, the Association of Author's Representatives. Check out this group's code of ethics on its web site www.aar-online.org.

Choosing the Right Agent

Agents, like publishers, specialize in specific categories of writing, and usually will not accept a book that does not fit. The agent knows the publishing houses that correspond to his/her specialty and the individual idiosyncrasies of its editors. The editors, in turn, have confidence in the judgment of the agent with whom he/she has worked previously. Once the agent places your book, he/she negotiates the contract and then shepherds the book through all the steps leading up to publication.

No author ever should attempt to negotiate a contract without qualified assistance. This is a very specialized arena, and only a literary attorney or agent should tackle the job. The negotiation involves compensation, rights, advances, royalties, promotional support, subsidiary royalties and more.

Your search for the right agent can be eased by using Writer's Digest Books' *Guide to Literary Agents*. It lists 600 agencies and describes their like and dislikes, contact information and the facts that will determine whether the agency is right for you.

You can also find a very helpful listing of agents in *Writer's Market*, also published by Writer's Digest Books. Once you've selected five or six possibilities, head to the Internet and study their web sites for far more detailed information.

Opening the Door

Two documents are key to success in your search for an agent: the Query Letter and the Book Proposal. A good query opens the agent's door which gives you the opportunity to pitch your book in great detail. The agent will invite you to submit either a detailed book proposal if your submission is nonfiction or the complete manuscript if you are submitting a novel.

The query should be thought of as a business inquiry, not a literary masterpiece. In it, you will quickly describe your book and the market that is waiting to read it. It should contain a few words of why you are the ideal person to write it.

Do not attempt to make your letter stand out by using cutesy techniques like colored paper or color ink. This should be a straight-forward presentation of the reasons why the agent should risk his/her time, energy and reputation by representing you and your work.

Before you prepare your query, find the format preferred by the agent on his/her web site. This will tell you whether to send the query by postal mail, e-mail or fax. When formatting, you will always be safe using Times Roman 12 point. Set your margins ragged right with at least one inch on each side. (Ragged right means the left margin is perfectly

straight, while the right margin varies with the length of the line of type. You can set this easily by using the icons in the top display bar.)

Check and recheck your text with great care to protect against any typos or grammatical errors, and be sure your page is clean and neat. Remember, this letter is the agent's introduction to you, and it should be as perfect as you can make it.

Try hard to contain the entire letter on one page. If you find that is impossible, then compose the letter without your credentials, and attach a second page with your background. But remember, the only background the agent cares about at this stage is your qualification to turn out a top quality book.

Do not use the standard resume form that you used during your career. Write this in a narrative form or as an outline, as long as it explains specifically why you are uniquely qualified to be the author of this book.

Be Specific

The challenge of the opening paragraph of your query is to entice the agent. Once done, you must expand your topic with some narrative and possibly an impressive quote if you have one. The task here is to help the agent fully understand what your book is about in as few words as possible. That is why it is so important to be specific. For example: It is not about gardening; it is a guide to preparing soil before you begin to plant. The subject isn't canoeing; it is paddling in swift white water.

If your writing credentials are sparse or nonexistent, your task is to sell your expertise. As a retiree with long years of experience in the subject you are writing about (hobby, trade, profession, etc), your extensive knowledge of the subject makes you

unique. Your expertise combined with the intriguing approach to the subject that you outlined in the first part of your letter makes you the ideal person to craft this book.

Detail any writing experience you may have had during your career years prior to your retirement--perhaps a major report or an article for the company newsletter, as well as any you might have done since your retirement.

Because of the complexity and importance of composing a strong book proposal—complete books have been devoted to this subject—a separate article is available that details the elements of that “make or break” document.