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Publishing your first commercial novel

By

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You've triumphantly typed those lovely last words "The End." Congratulations! You've finished your commercial novel. Now what do you do? Like almost every writer who finishes a novel, you undoubtedly would like to see your book in print. But how to get an editor to even look at it, much less buy it?

There is no formula for success. In the end, it's like finding your soul mate and a lot of luck is required. But there are things you can do to improve your odds, and that is what this article is about.

How do you know it's really done?

When I finished my first novel, *Path of Fate*, I ached to send it out to a publisher. Luckily I restrained myself and instead sent it out to trusted readers for comments. They caught plotting mistakes and character excesses that I was too close to see. I revised

again. And then I put it in the proverbial drawer. I wanted some time to return to the manuscript with fresh eyes.

However, at some point, you have to decide that indeed you are done. Some writers continue to polish manuscripts year after year, never believing they are done enough. How do you decide? Sometimes you can't judge—you are simply too close to give a fair assessment. Once again, it's time to turn to those trusted readers. What's a trusted reader? In my case, two professional novelists, and three other friends who I knew would not only give me honest feedback, but useful feedback—commenting on structure, character, plot, coherence, pacing, and give me specific and concrete responses. These people don't tell you what you want to hear, or even what you expect to hear; they tell you the truth, but a truth based on skilled reading.

Synopsis and Cover Letter

When you do submit your novel to a publisher or agent, you will be asked for a synopsis and a cover letter. And if you thought writing the novel was difficult, you're in for an unsettling surprise: the synopsis and cover letter are very nearly as difficult. During the time that *Path of Fate* went in the drawer, I wrestled with these two documents. It took three months of drafting and multiple revisions to finally arrive at something I believed would sell the book.

Every publisher and every agent has a different idea of what a synopsis should be. One rule of thumb is to provide one synopsis page for every 25 pages of manuscript. But I've never met an agent or editor who really wanted more than a 10 page synopsis on the outside. A more recommended length would be 2-3 single spaced pages, or 5-6 double

spaced pages. Mine was 4 double-spaced pages, and that included a half page describing the next two books in the trilogy. I recommend a double-spaced synopsis, if only for reading ease.

Some agents and publishers say they don't read synopses; they only read the sample chapters that accompany the synopsis, and if they like the writing, they request more. So why bother writing it? First, you can't be sure what kind of editor or agent you're submitting to, and second, a synopsis is something the editor uses to help sell your book to her company, or can show the marketing department to help plan promotion.

There are many books and articles on writing synopses, but the key components are as follows.

- Write in present tense.
- Put character names in all caps the first time you mention them, offering bits of description or characterization to make them real and interesting.
- Hook your reader with an exciting opening.
- Use as few character names as you can get away with. For instance, for my secondary characters, I referred to each them in terms of their relationship to a main character or situation: "But the traitors in their midst have other plans: ambush. Both men are killed in the fray." The two men have names, but in this context, their names would only distract from the story.
- Use as little jargon as you can. I write fantasy and have a lot of unusual words. I changed as much of it as I could to more normal words in order to keep the reader from getting bogged down.

- Tell the entire story—don't be coy with the ending, don't withhold elements in order not to give the story away. The point of the synopsis is to give the story away, after all.
- You can go chapter by chapter, or overall plot movements, but don't get caught up in trying to provide too much by way of subplots. I find chapter by chapter synopses often get bulky and difficult.

Hopefully it goes without saying that you should follow the guidelines of every prospective editor and agent you send to. Know their names—don't send to "The purchasing editor." Include an SASE with postage either for a reply or to return all your materials and indicate which in the letter. And speaking of the letter

Your letter is both a professional introduction and a hook to gain interest in your novel. You want to begin with a paragraph that says what you have to sell—i.e. a fantasy novel of a 120,000 words, a category romance of 80,000 words. Include the title. Then demonstrate knowledge of your market and how your novel fits into it: "it is a traditional fantasy that will appeal to fans of Kristin Britain and Raymond Feist."

Then you move into a short description of the novel. This is probably the most difficult part of the letter. You can take the approach of the movie treatment—"it's like *Star Wars* meeting *The Lord of the Rings*, with a sweeping tale of love, betrayal, war and triumph." But that hardly says anything about the book. So even if you begin with such a statement, you have to move on to a pointed description that also is exciting and intriguing. Keep it short—maximum of 150 words, less is better.

This paragraph need not give away the ending. Instead, it should grab the agent's or editor's attention and make him want to read more. My letter for *Path of Fate* read:

My novel is about Reisil, a young healer forced to make a bitter choice to save her people from the threat of war. As PATH OF FATE begins, a truce has halted the fighting between Reisil's native land and its neighbor. But traitors on both sides plot to shatter the fragile peace. On the night of the welcome celebration, kidnappers steal the daughter of the foreign ambassador from her bedchamber, leaving behind a trail of blood. To free her friend before she can be used to reignite the war, Reisil must join a band of rescuers she fears to trust. As Reisil journeys into enemy lands, she will be betrayed Magically soul-bonded to a goshawk against her will, Reisil struggles to overcome her own fear and hatred.

There's actually a lot more to the story than that. But notice I avoid using too many character or place names, and I focus on the main character and her conflict.

The next thing you want to offer is any particular qualifications you have that lend extra interest to your book. For instance, if you write mysteries, were you a cop? A forensic scientist? If you write historical romance, what research have you done that makes this novel especially resonant?

This paragraph should also identify you as a professional. Which means that editors are also interested in your ability to continue to write, and your awareness of the demands of publishing. Most first novels don't make money. If you can't continue to produce, then you aren't a good bet. I included information on the next two books in the trilogy, as well as previous publishing credits and my educational background, as it is in creative writing and therefore relevant. Do not mention you can knit a sweater in four

days, that you make great pesto, that you can change a tire in less than a minute—unless any of that is relevant to your qualifications.

The next paragraph should focus on why you chose this editor or this agent. Again, you're demonstrating your awareness of the field. Don't suck up, but you might mention you know the agent represents various successful authors whose work is similar to yours and you chose her because she's so good. Or you might say to an editor that you are a fan of the books she's edited and you feel she will be excited by what you have to offer.

Finally, tell them what you've enclosed, and if you know they will be anywhere you will be—at a writers conference, for instance—suggest meeting to discuss your manuscript in more detail. \

How to pick the right agent or editor

The first question about agents is usually, “do I really need one?” It used to be the answer was not necessarily. But now, and especially since 9/11, yes is more often the hard reality. Most editors don't take unagented or unsolicited submissions. You can get an editor to solicit your submission, but that can be difficult. Better to cover both bases and apply to both where you can.

In order to pick an editor or agent, start with novels you like that are similar to yours. Look at the acknowledgements pages in these books. Often the author will thank his agent and editor. Ask friends who writes in your field to recommend you to their agent. Many only take new clients on referral. Look in trade magazines like *Publishers Weekly*. Sales are listed, including which agent sold what to which editor.

For agents, you can also go to the *Literary Marketplace* (in many libraries) or a book like *The Guide to Literary Agents*. Both sources list agents and what kinds of literature they represent, give information about their submission guidelines, how many people they represent, how many are new writers, and so forth. You want an established agent that represents only 10-20 percent new writers and is regularly making sales. Otherwise, you might end up with someone who is too new to the market to have any real editorial contacts, and therefore won't get your stuff out of the slush pile any better than you.

I also recommend that you select an agent who keeps his office in New York where most of the editors are. It isn't a vital requirement anymore, not with modern technology. But New York agents have more regular access to editors, and that access translates into sales.

Again, be sure that you send to a real person and you choose wisely. Don't send your mystery manuscript to a fantasy editor. Most publishing houses have a policy that once one editor turns you down, none can accept the manuscript—it keeps in-house politics to a minimum. So research very carefully before you submit.

You are permitted to send out simultaneous partial submissions and queries—so you can submit to several editors and agents at the same time. I recommend no more than 3-5 of each at any given time. As soon as one asks for the entire manuscript, you're committed to allowing that person to have a look until he answers. For some editors, that can mean up to two years! Agents are typically much quicker, but they don't like for you to have made too many publishing submissions on your own—remember, once one editor in a house rejects your manuscript, none can accept it. So if you have already been

rejected by multiple houses, there isn't much an agent can do for you until you produce another book.

The writing world is very small, and agents and editors don't want to waste time on you if your complete manuscript is being considered elsewhere. They have long memories for writers who burn them. Be up front and honest and be patient with the process.

Increasing your odds—getting face-to-face for a pitch

There's no doubt that your odds of getting an agent or editor to look at your manuscript increase if you can make a personal pitch. How do you get face-to-face?

Many editors and agents attend writing conferences. One of the best for commercial writers is the *Pikes Peak Writers Conference*. Top editors and agents representing most commercial genres attend, and the conference offers personal pitch sessions with both, not to mention a wide variety of workshops. The conference is small enough to allow personal interaction with authors, agents and editors, and thus allows you to make pitches outside the formal sessions, as well as pick faculty brains for information. Other conferences include *Bouchercon* and *Magna Cum Murder* for mystery writers; regional and national *Romance Writers of America* conferences for romance writers; science fiction and fantasy conventions, especially *WorldCom* and *World Fantasy Con* for science fiction and fantasy writers; and *Writing the West Workshop* for western writers. For an excellent resource for finding workshops, look at the Shawguides website.

I was able to meet with my (soon-to-be) editor at a conference about three months after I submitted *Path of Fate* to her. We only met for 15 minutes, and in that time I pitched the novel and the rest of the trilogy, impressed upon her my commitment to writing and promotion, and energized her interest in the project. Three weeks later she bought the trilogy. I continue to believe that our meeting tipped the scales in my favor.

How do you respond to rejection/suggestions/offers?

In the best of all possible worlds, you will be receiving an offer, whether to be represented by an agent, or to be published. But it doesn't always happen that way.

One of the most important qualities for any writer is persistence. You must simply accept rejection and keep writing and submitting. Rejection can be discouraging, but sooner or later you can break in, unless you quit trying. Rejection isn't personal. Sometimes the editor is overstocked with books like yours. Sometimes they've filled their quota of your kind of book and need something different. The potential reasons are endless.

Some editors and agents will suggest revisions, but most often, making those revisions will not guarantee you a contract. So evaluate the suggestions carefully and decide for yourself if they will improve your manuscript or not. I remember the story of one writer who had one editor say, 'change this character and I will look at it again.' The next day the writer received a letter from a different editor asking for other changes, but said, 'keep this character the same at all costs.' It comes down to a matter of taste and the changes you are comfortable making.

When you get an offer from an agent, he may require a contract, though many don't. Mine does not. In some form, however, whether in a letter or contract, the terms of payment will be spelled out—usually 15% for domestic sales, 20% for foreign sales. Some will charge fees for copying and mailing, excessive to normal operations—it's up to you to have those things defined for you. You will also want to talk about what the agent will do—how hands on he will be, will he provide editorial advice, how often he will be in contact, etc.

If you have an offer from an editor, then you need to get an agent. Trust me, they earn their money. They will get you more money in your advance, but more importantly, they will guarantee that the contract will be favorable to you. The language of contracts is Byzantine and agents can get changes that often you can't, or worse, that you don't realize are necessary. Also, because your agent is doing the negotiating, you preserve your good relationship with your editor, which will be important as you go through the publication process.

For more information, my website www.dianapfrancis.com contains a number of links to topics important to writers of all genres.

Writers conferences where you can make a face-to-face pitch

<http://writing.shawguides.com> (a listing of writers conferences)

<http://www.ppwc.net> (Pikes Peak Writers workshop)

<http://www.writingthewest.com> (Writing the West)

<http://www.shepherd.edu/wcweb> (mystery, romance, sf/f, young adult)

<http://www.magnacummurder.com> (Magna Cum Murder)

<http://bouchercon2004.com> (Bouchercon—mystery and suspense)

<http://www.worldfantasy.org> (World Fantasy Con)

<http://www.worldcon.org> (World Science Fiction Con)

<http://www.rwanational.org> (Romance Writers of America national organization)