So, You Want to Publish a Book, Do Ya?

By Ernest O'Dell

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If you've never really considered writing a book, take a look at the rubbish filling bookshelves at kiosks the next time you go to the airport. The "authors" of that stuff are laughing all the way to the bank. While English majors and literary types are screaming at each other in the stuffy halls of Cambridge and Oxford, or on the pages of The New Yorker, these amateur authors are quietly rehashing tired plots and making millions from it. You're a smart person, so there's no reason why you shouldn't take a crack at making bank as well. (Heck, even if you can't spell worth a flip, you should give it a try. Al Gore's books sold millions.)

Here's how you too can tap into the wallets of all those new readers out there. Please note, however, that we can't actually write the book for you. You may have to do that yourself:
1. KNOW HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

The first rule of getting your book published is to avoid writing it.

Whoa! What are you talking about, Ernest?

Yes, it’s counterintuitive, but the main goal of anyone who wants to publish a book is to land a literary agent, before spending years writing something nobody wants to read.

If you don’t want to go the route of getting a literary agent, and you want to self publish through Print On Demand—then, by all means, do it!

Prepare a proposal. Let me explain: the literary world is a very “close-knit” society. It’s more like a closed community and you almost have to have a special invitation from someone on the “inside.”

The people who give the green light to your publication only accept books through very specific channels. Think about it: nobody could ever handle reading the mountains of garbage that aspiring authors churn out all the time, so the system has established filters to weed out most of the bilge. You need to learn what the filters are and how to get through them.

Namely, agents.

Agents—what exactly do they do?

An agent is an individual who performs much of this filtering process for you. He or she knows all the “in’s and out’s” of the industry and can make your life a lot easier. Try this on your own and you could end up with 99% rejection rate.

You certainly don’t want to send a manuscript directly to a publishing house. They won’t read it. They don’t have time nor the manpower to read everything that comes their way. They consider pieces that only come recommended by an agent they know.

If you've already written your book, or started on it, and you're reading this, don't fear; go directly to 2.
Agents read manuscripts, or ideas for manuscripts (known as queries and proposals), and decide whether a project has any merit or not. If it does, the agent signs a contract with the author, promising to use their best efforts to get the thing sold to a publishing house, in exchange for around 15% of the deal.

Editors at publishing houses would much rather deal only with agents who have a good track record for presenting quality ideas, so agents can be very choosy about who they sign. Landing a contract with a good agent is the whole idea of the game. Once you have one of those on your side, he or she will work incredibly hard to get your idea sold.

Agents, in turn, don’t particularly like reading 300 and 400 page manuscripts either. In fact, they don’t like reading much more than 1 page. If you can present a synopsis of your book idea like a Press Release—in one or two pages—all the better. So the first step to getting an agent to even pay attention to you is to send them a query letter. A query letter is essentially a short summary of your idea, who you are, and why you are qualified to write this project.

But you say, "Wait a minute, Ernest! I don't want to give up fifteen percent of my book-deal-to-be. That sucks!"

**Can you proceed without an agent?**

Sure you can. But, unless you're Sarah Palin and have a lot of name recognition, and the mere mention of your name acts like a lighting rod to friends and foes alike... don't even try.

**Are literary agents worth the cash?**

As Sarah would say, “You betcha!”

Look... do the math: 85% of zero is still zero. Last time I used my calculator, it still came out the same. And, unless you self publish and work your butt off, that's exactly what you're going to get if you try to “go it alone” without an agent.
But, don't worry: there are thousands of literary agents all over the United States, and even more across the globe. There are also several excellent guides that give you tons of information about what they like to represent and how to contact them. The very best is the Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents, by Jeff Herman. You can search on Google or your favorite online bookseller like Amazon, Borders or Barnes and Noble.

But first you need to know what agents want...

2. PREPARE YOUR PROPOSAL

The first step to getting your name in print is to prepare a proposal. At the top of the proposal is all your contact information, then the literary agents name and contact info.

Do Not Send Out Impersonal Generic Templates to Literary Agents!

They like to be treated personally and special just like you or anybody else. They're busy people, and if you send out a mass mailing with a bunch of “no-name” proposals to them, you can imagine where they're going to end up.

You guessed it! The “round” file.

Remember, the proposal is a document that acts as a little soldier that does your bidding. You can send out a thousand of these little messengers: you just have to make sure they're all personalized to the recipient.

Write a thorough outline of your idea for a book. You will first contact agents by sending a query letter. Then, if any agent wants to follow up with you by reading your proposal, you will need to have written and ready to send to them. You can make a template on your computer and then fill in their name and contact info, print it off, sign it, and drop it in the mail.
Here's what to write:

**General Overview:** The first 1 or 2 pages or so should be a general summary of the entire book. If it is a non-fiction work, just explain what you intend to write about and what topics you will cover. If you are writing fiction, provide a very general synopsis of your plot.

**Market:** Next, write a 1 or 2 page description of the market to whom you think your book will appeal. Describe the age group, socio-economic, and educational characteristics of the audience you think your book will draw.

**Competition:** This section is where you provide a description of the other books out there that also cover this topic. Be honest here because an agent can easily find out if you're omitting some best-seller. Just because someone else has written something on the same subject doesn't mean you can't make money off of it.

**Remember:** a market filled with similar books is a good sign that there is money to be made. If you could write a love novel about the Jonas Brothers or Justin Beber, just imagine how many thirteen-year-old girls would buy that nonsense.

**Authors:** This portion of the proposal is a 1-page description of yourself and your co-authors, if any. Boast all you can because your agent is going to want to think that you are a great author for this book, to convince a publishing house to pay you for your idea. If you don't have name recognition yet, then you might want to go the self publishing route first, build up your reputation, then approach an agent. By then, people will know who you are when they mention your name.

**Chapter Summary:** The bulk of the proposal will be chapter by chapter outline of what you intend to cover in your book. If you are writing fiction, here is where you may have to include up to twenty pages of actual samples. If your book is non-fiction, stick to the minimum, either outlining or giving a brief synopsis of each chapter.


**Delivery:** This is a 3-sentence snippet at the end of the proposal that describes how many words you think the finished book will be and how long it will take you to write it.

For example, this article is a little over 3,000 words, and depending on spacing and margins, you should have anywhere from 200 to 400 words per page. Depending on the size and format of your book, margins, layout, type style (font) and font size, your book could easily run 30,000 to 40,000 words for a 100 page book.

Now, a 100 page book really isn't a lot to hold in your hands. Even a 200 page book, in a 6” by 9” format can come out to about a half inch to 3/4” thick once finished.

3. RESEARCH AGENTS

When you contact agents, be aware that they specialize in certain genres: they divide themselves into fiction and non-fiction camps. So grab that Guide to Literary Agents and start thumbing through the pages.

These guides list agents by various categories, and give you detailed information about each agent. In particular, you can see what the agent does or does not like to see in a query and a proposal and, more importantly, what books they have represented in the past.

And don't be intimidated by the fact that some of them have represented “Big Name” authors in the past. In some cases, that can be a plus for you. If your book fits into their purview, go ahead and contact them.

The second thing you should do is compile a list of twenty or thirty agents whose general interests align with the kind of book you're planning on writing. (It also helps to actually be capable of writing the book.) If you've just come back from a fantastic trip to Italy's wine country and think you can write something about it as well as any other travel writer, look for agents interested in non-fiction, travel or the “food and wine” category.
If you have a burning desire to embellish the story about your recent trip to the coast, and you want to turn it into an action adventure, then change the names of the actual people involved, make a note of agents who specialize in fictional human dramas, and then contact them.

You get the point.

If you don't, then you're wasting your time trying to be a writer.

4. CONTACT AGENTS

Once you've got your list of 20 or 30 target agents, you can start to get the word out. The way to make contact with these people without an official introduction is to churn out a query letter. (Of course, if you have a contact of some sort in the publishing world, then by all means, use it.)

Again, a query is similar to a 1-page Press Release—or an attention grabber—that gives busy agents enough information about you and your project to tickle their interest without boring them with needless details. These people are constantly shuffling hundreds of pages of manuscripts, letters, and faxes, and the last thing they have time for is some unsolicited bore.

Remember the “K.I.S.S.” rule? Keep it short and simple—to the point—and use the following structure.

The Teaser: In the first paragraph, toss out a teaser. Come up with a first sentence that really grabs the agent's attention. (Is is starting to read like a Press Release?) If you're a former astronaut or a Harvard lawyer, throw it at them. But you don't need to be incredible to survive this beauty pageant—what you really need is a nice fit between who you are and what the book you've written is about. For example, "I have been a small town lawyer for 30 years and I propose to write a book about all the funny cases I've tried in court." Now, there's nothing unbelievable about that combination, but there must be a compelling fit between who you are and what you intend to write.
Expanding the Idea: Next, write 3 or 4 sentences about what you will write, and if you have a great example of an anecdote that exemplifies your idea, be sure to include it. Rather than lamenting the constraint of having only a paragraph to make your pitch, celebrate the fact that you can show off your best stuff in your manuscript.

All About You: The third paragraph should contain more information about yourself. Provide another 3 or 4 sentences describing relevant facts that demonstrate the connection between you and your idea. If that means flexing your academic credentials, be sure to do so, but only if those accolades are relevant to your idea. Perhaps your idea requires you to demonstrate that you're just a homeless dirtbag. Fine. The cardinal rule is to show that you have a good idea for a book, and that you are the perfect person to write it.

The Closer: In the final paragraph, mention that you will show your proposal to only one agent at a time—agents don't like having to worry that someone else is going to “scoop” their story and snatch their prize. Agents are kind of like reporters and cab drivers: they don't like a whole lot of competition and people coming in and scooping (or stealing) their stories—or in the case of the cab driver— their passenger.

Mention why you have decided to send it to them, perhaps alluding to having seen their credentials in the directory of agents. Tell them which guide you found them listed in.

Finally, be sure to tell them how to get in touch with you with a phone number, fax, address, web site (if you have one) and email information.

Remember: the query letter should be an appetitewhetting morsel. Don't exceed 1 page and give them more information than they need, or you can kiss it goodbye. Keep it short and make it a teaser. Then sit back and wait.

Important note: Don't forget to include a self-addressed stamped envelope, in case they want to contact you by snail mail.
5. CHOOSE AN AGENT

This is where you're going to boil everything down to the Process of Elimination. Agents will respond to your query in one of two ways: 1.) by phone if they're interested and 2.) by mail if they're not. You might even get lucky if they use email for acceptance or rejection, but don't hold your breath.

What does this mean?

Well, it means that good news comes earlier than bad news. The good news is when they call you: the bad news is when they “write you off.” It's sort of like getting a rejection letter from a job interview instead of an offer. It's also like getting a rejection letter from the White House when you've invited the President of the United States to be your keynote speaker. (That actually happened to me!)

But, I do digress...

Most likely, you won't be deluged with phone calls from a lot of agents. Don't even hold out hope for it. Your phone isn't going to be ringing off the wall. These people hear over a hundred book ideas every day of their life and you can be sure they're going to be pretty skeptical by the time your query lands on their desk. Expect a limited number of responses: one is all you need. When you do hear from someone, kick your project into high gear. Having an agent interested in your project is huge.

First, make sure you're never “out of pocket” when they call. If there's one thing an agent hates more than an answering machine, it's voice mail. It's alright if he or she has voice mail—but after getting your letter of inquiry—the last they want to talk to is a machine.

Think about it: do YOU like to be put on hold, listening to elevator music, or leaving a message “after the beep?”
One way to avoid this is to have an automated “virtual assistant” that uses unified communications to track you down, or follow you so that your callers never get a busy signal, and they can get in touch with you while you're out of the office.

If you MUST use a voice mail system, just make sure to return the agent's call AS SOON AS POSSIBLE... like within the next 60 seconds. Trust me on this one: they might not like talking to machinery, but they'll be impressed when you call them back—QUICKLY. Tell them how flattered and delighted you are that he or she has expressed an interest in your book project. Be honest with them and let them know that you are also considering other agents and that you will be choosing which agent you will send your proposal to in a few days.

Then, wait a few days to see whether you hear from any other interested parties. If you do hear from more than one, repeat the flattering phone call, but then begin the appraisal process. The best way to decide which agent to send a proposal to is research their previous work. You will want to go with the best agent for you, and reading about the titles he or she has sold previously will shed a lot of light on your decision-making process.

To decide which agent to send your proposal to, look up their entry in one of the Agent Guides and make a list of the books they have previously represented. To keep the calculation easy, simply tally up the number of books that are either written by an author you have heard of or published by a company whose name you recognize. That's a pretty crude calculation, but it works for the most part when picking the most accomplished agent. And they know that. As a matter of fact, the good ones would expect you to do so.

After you've come to a decision, act quickly. Be sure to inform the agent of your choice that you are going to send them your proposal. And don't send it to anyone else.

Those agents who you have eliminated in the selection process, you can either write them a nice letter informing
them that you've selected another agency for your book, but will keep them “open” for your next book project.

Do you see what you're doing here?

You're giving them a rejection letter, yes, but you're also doing it in a nice way that lays the foundation for a good relationship in the future. And... when you get to your next book project, you can then select them for it and ask them if they would like to receive your proposal.

If they blow you off because they feel disappointed in your first selection, that's okay. You'll live with it. There's thousands of other agents out there who are going to line up to get a contract with you: especially if your book hits the “big time.”

6. SIGN THE CONTRACT

Now you wait, and wait, and wait some more.

You need to give your agent time to read your proposal and float the idea around the office—with the editor, the management, the ownership. If they love it, they will call you in a couple of weeks. If they don't, they won't—it's like a bad relationship at this point. But, you need to get back “in the market,” so to speak, so give your agent a friendly reminder if you haven't heard anything from them. After—let's say—six weeks, call the agent and say that you'll be passing on your proposal to another interested party if you still don't hear back within a week. If nothing, then go back to other agents who responded to your query and send it to one of them.

If you do hear good news... get psyched up! You have an agent who wants to sign you! The best part is that you don't have to do any more work at this stage. The agent will send you a contract stating that they will attempt to sell your book using their best efforts and if they are
successful, they will receive 15% of the deal. (Some agents may want more, some less. I have one agent in Oklahoma City that gets 17% from me, and another in New York City that gets 40%.) Just don't sell yourself short on the deal. These contracts are usually only 1 or 2 pages long and don't need to be reviewed by an attorney.

**Just watch for two things:**

1. that the agent isn't looking to be your exclusive representative for more than a year (which is about the standard), and  
2. that they aren't going to charge you for the cost of office “overhead” if the book isn't sold.

If either of those two points hold up the contract negotiations, you can always reject their contract, or make a counter-contract (another article...).

Once you sign the contract they send you, make any changes to your proposal they suggest. They want to hone your piece into a cash cow. Once your proposal is ready, they will start promoting your book proposal to their publishing companies.

Getting publishers to fork over a cash “advance” for mere ideas is not an easy task, so be ready for your agent to forward you a number of negative issues from some of America's finer publishing houses. But comfort yourself by thinking about how badly you’d be abused by sending your manuscripts cold to these people.

I've been accepted by some of the best and some of the worst. I've also been rejected by some of the best—and some of the worst. So, don't take it personal. It's just business, and it's a game of numbers. If you run through 20 or 30 agents, and they all fall apart on you—or worse, reject you outright—that's okay. You've got thousands of others to work with.
When things do pan out your way, then you’re all set. Your agent will negotiate an advance for your book—as low as a few hundred dollars to as high as several thousand, or even a few hundred thousand. And, unless your book goes through several reprints, and you get multiple advances, don't worry too much about getting a multi-million dollar advance on your book. By that time, you'll be making several million dollars in royalties anyway—if it takes off and hits the best seller lists.

In either scenario, the agent is going to want their commission, or “fee”—usually 15%—for services rendered. And, as I state earlier, don't get greedy: do the math. Eighty-five percent of nothing is still zip, zilch, nada. Eighty-five percent of a hundred thousand dollar advance is $85,000. I know a lot of people don't make that kind of money in a year: don't you?

Either way, you're still going to be sitting pretty. Cash the check or put it in your bank. But, now you're under contractual obligation to WRITE THE BOOK. If you don't, or you're late on your deadline, they can sue you for damages and breach of contract, and you could end up losing more than just the cash advance. You would be losing a lot of money in court and attorney fees trying to defend some bad decisions, or worse, put your name on everybody's “Do Not Call” list.

If you've read this far, you know I'm going to give you the “straight poop” and I'm not going to “beat around the bush.” So now, you ask, “But, Ernest... I've never written a book, much less an article or a “special report. How do I get started?”

Ah! Okay! (Somehow, I knew we were going to get around to this subject...)

Not to worry: you can pick up Strunk & White's Manual of Style for Writers, or you can take some writing classes online, or at your local community college. Consider it an investment in yourself. Or you can buy all sorts of books on writing and read them. But the biggest thing to remember here is that YOU MUST START WRITING.
It doesn't matter what you write about, as long as you get into the discipline and mindset of writing. As I've state before in many an article and forum threads, “...mechanics 'mechanic,' carpenters make sawdust and builders build buildings. Doctors and lawyers practice their profession, and “working girls” ...well, they work!

So, if you're going to call yourself a writer, you've got to “buckle down” and sit down on your duff and...

...write.

That's right. I said... write!

And write, and write, and write, until you dream this stuff in your sleep!

Then you write some more.

I've been writing all my life. But, just because you haven't been doesn't mean that you can't. You can. It's a “learned talent.” It's not necessarily something you're born with. Some people have the talent, but that's not the most important factor here. What is important is PASSION! And excitement!

If you love what you're doing, and you're excited about it, the passion will come through in your words. If you sit down and write to someone in the first person (you, yours, etc.) like you're having a personal conversation with them, then—most likely—they will sit spell-bound by your words.

I would highly recommend reading anything Joe Vitale writes about writing, ad copy, or copy writing. He has a ton of books available at Amazon.com and I personally recommend them because I have all of them.

You can check out some of his books by clicking here on this resource page...
If you have any questions, or need some direction, don't hesitate to call or write. I'll be here if you need me.

To your success,
Ernest O'Dell

Ernest O'Dell is the President and CEO of Questar TeleCommunications and Guerrilla Internet Marketing. His company, founded in 1982, is a leading provider in research and implementation of Unified Communications and Messaging for the real estate and insurance industries. Many of his web sites and blogs continue to get millions of visitors each month.

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