

Ideas For Getting Published

By [Randy Ingermanson](#)

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note: This special report was compiled with permission from several issues of Randy Ingermanson's terrific "Advanced Fiction Writing" e-zine. And feel free to pass this report along to your friends.

About The Author:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 6000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>. Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

**If you like this ebook, be sure to check out
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On Writing A Query Letter

This article is in response to a reader question to me a couple of months ago. The question was, in essence, "How do you write a query letter?" I felt it better to respond here than via private email, since the answer is a bit long.

Writing a query letter is the **SECOND** best way to get the attention of an editor or agent. The best way is to meet Mr. Rightagent or Ms. Perfecteditor at a writing conference and wow them with your perfect pitch, your punchy proposal, and your powerful prose.

But sometimes that's just not in the cards. It might be that your pesky Mr. Rightagent or Ms. Perfecteditor isn't coming to a conference near you until sometime in the next century.

Whatcha gonna do?

First step: Weep those little eyes out, because it really is a lot easier to make contact at a writing conference.

Second step: Write a killer query letter and send it off.

Understand this first -- a query letter is a polite way to introduce yourself **AND** your project. That's all it is. And that means it's partly about you. Most agents and editors are hoping you'll be more than just a one-book pony. So they want to see that you've got the ideas to write about and the skills to write them.

When you write a query letter, you have one goal: to get permission to send either a proposal or your manuscript. So it's easy to measure the success or failure of a query letter. They either say yes or say no.

There's one overriding principle here: Be quick. Your query letter might be one of fifty that comes in every WEEK to the editor or agent. They do not want to read an encyclopedia. Because of the numbers, they are looking for a reason to say no. Any reason will do. Here are some excellent reasons to say no which you yourself would LEAP on if you were an editor or agent:

- a) They spelled your name wrong
- b) They have bad grammar or spelling
- c) Their novel is in a genre you don't do
- d) Their story idea is boring
- e) Their query didn't FORCE you to say yes

(a) through (d) are obvious enough. If a writer is careless, inept, or dull, then they are wasting the time of the editor or agent. (e) is a little less obvious, but imagine you get fifty letters a week, and ten of them have perfect spelling and grammar, are in a genre you like, and have an interesting story idea. Do you request all ten?

NO! If you did that every week, on average, you'd be getting ten proposals or full manuscripts every week. And you do have other things to do besides read stuff that "isn't boring." You only want to spend your time on work that has a lot more going for it than "not boring." You want zing. You want pizzazz. You want your inner fire lit.

Here's the strategy then for your query letter:

- a) Tell who you are and why you're interesting
- b) Set the hook for your killer story idea
- c) Sketch your storyline QUICKLY
- d) Tell why you're the person to write this story

e) Ask permission to send more

That's it. Do that as fast as possible. (a),(b) and (c) can be in any order, but (d) and (e) should come in that order at the end of the letter.

Here's an example of a reasonable query letter, almost identical to the cover letter that John Olson and I actually used for our novel OXYGEN. (We already had permission to send the proposal, because we'd made contact at a writing conference. But if we hadn't had permission, this is the query we'd have sent. It would have worked.)

This letter was sent in 1999 and used the best information we had at the time regarding NASA's plans. We used the editor's name in the greeting. Watch for the hook in paragraph 1, the storyline in paragraph 2, our unique qualifications in paragraph 3, a marketing hook in paragraph 4, and the request for permission in paragraph 5.

Dear Editor:

In the spring of 2001 the incoming President of the United States will be presented with a unique opportunity -- to go down in history as the President who put mankind on Mars. NASA, the Planetary Society, and the Mars Society plan to launch a huge media campaign to gather public support for an affordable program to take us to Mars.

Hoping to surf the resulting media wave, we are writing a novel based on the actual technology that NASA plans to use in 2014 -- but with a major twist. Soon after trans-Mars injection, an explosion leaves the crew without enough oxygen to get to Mars and without sufficient fuel to return to earth. To make matters worse, evidence suggests that the ship was sabotaged by one of the crew members. The only way they can reach Mars is for one astronaut

to put the others into drug-induced comas. But first they have to decide whom they can trust.

We are uniquely qualified to write this book. Randy has a Ph.D. in physics from UC-Berkeley and John has a Ph.D. in biochemistry from UW-Madison. We have both spent months researching NASA, the Mars Semi-Direct plan, and the complex web of issues behind a manned Mars mission -- including its profound implications on current evolutionary theory.

While we were interviewing a NASA doctor at the Mars Society Conference in Boulder, Colorado last August, a man walked up and joined us in asking the doctor questions. We learned that he is planning to release a Mars Direct-based novel and two movies in the spring of 2001. His name is James Cameron -- of Titanic and Alien fame. The race is on! Anybody who joins the race soon enough is sure to be a big winner.

May we send you a proposal and some sample chapters?

Sincerely,

Randy Ingermanson and John Olson

* * *

If you got this query letter, what would you do? Our editor bought it and published the book -- in the spring of 2001. If only NASA had worked a little harder on their Mars promotion, and if only there hadn't been that little to-do on 9/11 . . .

On Writing Proposals

Part 1

This is the first in a series of columns on writing a book proposal. In this issue, we'll tackle the thorny question of getting endorsements for your proposal.

At least once a week, I get an email from a writer wanting to know if I can write an endorsement for the proposal she is writing for her novel.

The answer to that is very clearcut: no and yes.

If that sounds confusing, good. Because the request is ambiguous in the first place, so it's only fair that the answer should be ambiguous too.

A little background: It seems that more and more publishers are encouraging unpublished novelists to include a list of possible endorsements in their proposals. From the publisher's point of view, this makes sense. If a novelist knows that Steven King guy well enough to get an endorsement, then that's a big marketing plus.

The problem, I think, is that many writers are confused about what exactly is being asked for here. And that translates into massive confusion when said writers ask published authors for that pesky endorsement.

The thing is that you have a number of ways you can play this. Some of them are reasonable and some are unreasonable. Here are your options:

a) Ask a published novelist whom you've never met to read your manuscript and write an endorsement that you can put in your proposal.

b) Ask a published novelist whom you know well to read the manuscript and write an endorsement to put in your proposal.

c) Ask a published novelist whom you know well and who has already read your work to write an endorsement to put in your proposal.

d) Ask an expert whom you interviewed for your novel to read your manuscript and write an endorsement for your proposal.

e) Ask one of the above persons to agree to read the manuscript "someday," if it ever gets accepted for publication, and then possibly write an endorsement.

Now you can see why the answer to an endorsement request is so ambiguous. There's a lot of difference in those options (a) through (e). Let's look at them in turn.

a) If you ask a published novelist you don't know to read a manuscript that hasn't yet been accepted for publication, you are asking a LOT. It might take all day to read your book. Your book might not be any good. Or it might be in desperate need of a good harsh edit. So you are essentially asking this published novelist to do the same job that agents and editors normally do -- except that agents and editors are PAID to do this kind of work. But it's not ethical to pay a dime to your endorser. The only possible answer to this kind of request is "no". Because saying "yes" even once guarantees that a flood of similar requests will deluge the author, who will starve to death because he'll never write another word.

b) If you ask a published novelist whom you know well to read a manuscript that hasn't yet been accepted for publication, you are still asking a LOT. This has all the hazards of (a) above, with the extra one that now you're putting a strain on your friendship by asking something that really isn't

reasonable. Some novelists will say yes to this, but they really shouldn't. Because if your novel is lousy, you've put them in a terrible bind.

c) If you ask a published novelist whom you know well and who has already read your manuscript, even though it hasn't yet been accepted for publication, you are one lucky goose. How the heck did you meet this saint? Presumably, this novelist is in your critique group. Or she's a relative or long-time friend. In any event, you want to tread lightly here. If you ask outright for an endorsement, there's the terrible risk that your novel is lousy and you're going to put your friend on the spot. It helps here if she's already told you she loves the book. In fact, you should only really ask if she DOES love the book. Now, if she's the saint I think she is, she'll probably offer to write an endorsement for you before you even ask. That's the best of all worlds, because then you're not putting her on the spot, she's volunteering. I have written such an endorsement only twice that I can recall. I don't mind volunteering, when the book is good. I DO mind being involuntarily volunteered. I don't like being put on the spot.

d) If you have an expert whom you interviewed for your novel, then you're in good shape. This expert might be a street cop or a scientist or a World War II veteran or a llama breeder or anyone who's provided you with special info for your novel. These folks have two things going for them. First, they generally don't have a thousand other novelists asking them for endorsements, so saying "yes" to you doesn't put them at risk of being deluged with requests. Second, such an expert usually isn't expected to know good writing from bad, so if your novel is lousy, they won't know and nobody will blame their faulty judgment. So there's no pressure on them on that account. So ask your expert! The worst they can do is say "no."

e) In all of the above cases, you've asked somebody to read the manuscript and write an endorsement before it gets accepted for publication. The

endorsement then serves partly to validate you to the editor and the publishing house. But you have another option. You can ask them if they'll consider reading the proposal ON CONDITION that you sell it to a publisher. So they won't actually have to read it until AFTER some editor somewhere buys it. You can see that this really takes your potential endorser off the spot. She's no longer serving as "quality control" for the publishing houses. So it's safe to say "yes" here, because it'll only ever need to be read if it's actually good enough to get published. And every endorser knows that she always has the option to read 20 pages and then quit. Or read the whole thing and not write an endorsement. So there's no pressure here. You'll note that this also makes such a promise pretty empty. If you like, you can line up a bunch of novelists in your proposal who promise to read the novel "for possible endorsement." But they could all back out, so there's not a lot of value in lining up these possible endorsers at the proposal stage. With one exception: if they are experts in the field you're writing. Expert sources aren't going to back out of writing an endorsement if they don't like your style. They'll probably love your style, as long as you get your facts right. So line up some experts in the endorsement section of your proposal, if experts are relevant for the book you're writing.

My own personal policy, when someone asks for an endorsement in the proposal is as follows: First, I point out that I can't possibly read and endorse unsold manuscripts. Second, I say that I'm always happy to read books for "possible endorsement" once they've been sold, so please sell the book first and then come back and ask me and I'll say "yes" -- provided it's in a genre which I like. My friends know which genres I like to read. Third, I ask that I not be listed in the proposal as a "potential endorser," for the very good reason that I don't want editors to believe that I'm giving any sort of "seal of approval" on projects I haven't even looked at yet.

Once in a while, a manuscript catches my eye at a writing conference, and then I'll tell the author to use my name when talking to editors or when writing a proposal. Or I may even make an introduction to an appropriate editor or agent. But I prefer to volunteer for this, because then I have some measure of quality control.

I have read and endorsed books by people I've never met. On the other hand, I've sometimes read books by close friends and then NOT endorsed the book. This can mean that I was too busy to finish the book or it can mean that I didn't care for the book. Or it might mean I'm in a crabby, grouchy, grinchy mood today. Don't ask so I won't have to tell.

I would hazard that most published writers have a policy similar to mine. I was a bit more of a pushover early on in my career, until my agent pointed out that it's not my job to save the ENTIRE world. It's quite OK to leave part of that job to the next guy.

Part 2

This is the second in a series of columns on writing a book proposal. In this issue, I want to talk about that infamous "hook" that everyone talks about.

What is a "hook?"

Strictly speaking, the hook is not part of the proposal, it's part of the cover letter. When you send in a proposal to an editor or agent, you include a cover letter on top that tells the editor/agent what it is they're getting. (So they know it's a book proposal, and not a shipment of toilet paper.)

The hook is that part of the cover letter that grabs the editor by the throat and forces her to read the proposal. Editors may get dozens of proposals per week. But every editor gets the same 40 hour work week that everyone else gets. (All the editors who read this e-zine are now snorting -- "40 hours??? What weed is Randy smoking?") So OK, editors have the same 80 hour work week as everyone else.

So when the editor opens YOUR proposal, her first prayer is, "Please, God, help me find a quick reason to say NO." (Her second prayer is, "Please let this be the next J.K. Rowling.")

Editors work fast. A good editor can scan a cover letter in less than 10 seconds and KNOW whether it's not any good. And a cover letter that lies there on the page like boiled tofu is not any good.

A hook does NOT have to be sexy. It can be as simple as this:

"I met you recently at the XYZ Writing Conference, and you asked me to send you the proposal for my novel ALPHABET SOUP. I'm enclosing it here."

That's not sexy. That's just telling the editor that she's already interested in your proposal so she can put it on her stack. That's all you need.

If you use this hook, you had better be telling the truth. If you lie at this stage of the game, you will eventually be caught and then you'll be dog meat. Do NOT rely on an editor's poor memory!

If you haven't met the editor at a conference, then you'll need to grab attention on sheer merit. Here's an example of a hook I used years ago to capture the interest of a top New York agent. This was for a historical novel I was writing:

"Have you ever wished murder were legal? Not so many centuries ago, it was!"

The next paragraph of my cover letter explained the ancient "law of the blood avenger" and then gave a quick summary of my protagonist's quest for vengeance.

The agent liked that hook so much, she requested the first chapter. She liked the chapter enough to request the full manuscript. She didn't like the story enough to want to represent me, but at least she read it. Without a good hook, that would never have happened.

What made this hook work was its paradoxical nature. How can murder possibly be legal? If you use a paradox like this, you need to be able to explain it quickly and then tie it into your storyline.

Another option for your hook is to focus on yourself. If you have some special qualifications for writing your novel, this can be particularly effective. For example, any of these would light up an editor's pajamas:

"I've been an LA homicide cop for 30 years and I'm writing a police procedural set in Hollywood."

"I work in the lab of a Nobel laureate chemist and I'm writing a novel about big science gone awry."

"I'm a cardiac surgeon writing a medical thriller."

"I've ridden in rodeos so long I don't have any unbroken bones left in my body, and I'm writing a novel about a Mary Kay salesman with marital problems."

Oops! NOPE! If you're going to show what an interesting person you are, your life had better tie in to your novel. Make that last one a novel about

"rodeo clowns" or "gay cowboys" or "a dude ranch comedy" and you've got something going.

A hook is NOT the one-sentence summary of your story. However, if you have a strong enough one-sentence summary, then you don't need a hook. And yet most one-sentence summaries can be strengthened by a good hook.

Here's an example taken from one of my own books, in which I've integrated the hook with the one-sentence summary:

"I am a theoretical physicist from Berkeley writing a novel about a rogue physicist who travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul."

Not bad, eh?

Note that the one-sentence summary would have been pretty strong on its own: "A rogue physicist travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul."

But see how much stronger it is to include the hook: "I am a theoretical physicist from Berkeley writing a novel about . . ."

In this case, the hook makes it clear that I bring something to the party above just an intriguing storyline.

In the end, your writing is going to stand or fall on its own merits. But a good hook (and a good one-sentence summary) can give it a fighting chance with that pesky editor who's still up at 2 AM slitting open envelopes and hoping each one is either too horrible for words or too excellent to put down.

One final hook of my own: I discuss the role of hooks, one-sentence summaries, and cover letters in the lecture on Proposals in my Fiction 201 course, which I just released today. Yes, I am one sly devil, ain't I?

Part 3

This is the third in a series of columns on writing a book proposal. In the last two columns, I've talked about endorsements and writing the cover letter. Now I'd like to talk about the summary page.

The purpose of the summary page of a proposal is to give all the high points. It's a "proposal within a proposal."

I've never worked in a publishing company, but I've heard about what goes on when the committee meets to decide which books get published and which don't. The editors come in with their stacks of proposals and their intent is to sell them to the committee. The committee's job is to cherry-pick the best of the lot.

The committee is typically made up of editors, key people on the sales team, the marketing folks, and the publisher. All of these are busy people. In theory, they are supposed to have read all the proposals before the committee meeting. In practice, they don't always have time to do that.

So in practice, they may have read only the first page of your proposal. The editor gets up, makes her pitch for your book, and while she's talking, the committee folks are scanning your proposal. Which means they're reading the summary page and flipping through the rest.

That's why the top page is so important. If that page doesn't sing, then the fat lady will.

The question is: "What goes on the first page?"

The answer is: "The bare essentials."

Here is what you **MUST** have on your summary page:

* You need a working title, and it should be the best one you can come up with. They'll quite possibly change it, so label it "working title" so they know that you know that they get a say in the matter.

* You need a description of your target reader. Try not to be too vague or too sharply defined. Remember that every book is a niche book. It's nutty to say that "everybody" is going to read your book. A book targeted to "forty-something Asian career women" sounds a whole lot easier to market than one aimed at "young people."

* You need a genre description. For example, "Mystery" or "Romance" or "Historical" or "Science Fiction." Different publishers think differently about genres, so it wouldn't hurt to look at similar books by the publisher you're submitting to. Somewhere on the back cover, the genre is likely to be listed. Use that to guide you in how you label your genre.

* You need an estimated word count. Round this to the nearest 10,000 words or the nearest 5,000 words, depending on how obsessive you are. Typical novels these days are 50,000 to 100,000 words, depending on the genre. Some genres allow even higher word counts, but remember that the longer the story, the higher the production costs. Somebody has to edit all those words, and somebody has to pay for it. If your book is too expensive to produce, then you won't sell it.

* You need a completion time. Round this to the nearest month. It's reasonable to say "Six months after signing a contract." If you say "Six years after signing a contract," then you are in La La Land. If the book is already polished and ready to go, say so. But don't imagine the book will hit the shelves in 2 months. Won't happen unless you're the reigning Celeb Of The Week. If you are, call me and I'll ghost your book for you, you vapid little piece of meat, you. But you aren't and you know it.

* You need a story premise. You can write this as a one-sentence summary or you can write it as a one-paragraph summary. Do whichever works best. Or use both.

Depending on exactly what kind of book you're writing and who your publisher is and who you are, you might include a variety of other pieces of information on your summary page. Resist the urge to pack in all possible information onto this page. You do have 10 or 12 other pages to work with. Stick to the essentials. Like my friend James Scott Bell says, "Sell the sizzle, not the steak."

The summary page of your proposal is only the most important 500 words you will ever write in your entire life. So don't stress on it, OK?

Part 4

This is the fourth in a series of columns on writing a book proposal. In the last three columns, I've talked about endorsements, writing the cover letter, and writing the summary page. Now I'd like to talk about how to write your author bio.

The purpose of an author bio is to show the publisher that you are the right person to write this book.

You may be thinking, "But it's a novel! I can write a novel about anything I want."

Yeah, true. But imagine you're an editor who publishes mysteries. You have two manuscripts sitting on your desk. Both of them are gritty police procedurals set on the mean streets of L.A. One is by a 16 year old home-schooled girl from Maine. The other is by a 55 year old L.A. homicide detective with 30 years of experience on the force.

Without knowing anything else about these manuscripts, which of these would you be more interested in?

Now let's say the two prospective authors are the same two people, but instead the story is a coming-of-age chicky novel set in upstate Maine.

NOW which writer are you more interested in?

The basic rules for your bio are these:

- * Keep it short. A couple of hundred words is plenty.
- * Keep it relevant. What aspects of your life tie in to your story?

* Make it zing. Zing is always good. It shows you can write. It shows you can market yourself effectively. It shows you can be an asset to your publisher.

The proposals I've written for my novels have always highlighted my special knowledge as a physicist.

As an example, I have three historical novels in print. I have no academic qualifications in history. (Just a LOT of research.) BUT, these aren't just any historical novels. They're time-travel novels. And I'm a physicist. I put that fact into my author bio. Zing! Ka-ching!

I also wrote two novels with my buddy John Olson about the first human mission to Mars. In our author bios, we highlighted the fact that I have a Ph.D. in physical science and John has a Ph.D. in life science. Both of those are HIGHLY relevant to a novel about Mars. Our qualifications helped us sell our books.

I ran a mentoring session at a writing conference last year. One of the women was writing a historical novel set in South America and one of her viewpoint characters was a llama. That may sound a little weird, but it was actually rather cool. It became much cooler when I talked to her and discovered that she raises llamas and has access to a registry of llama breeders with about 50,000 names in it. Think a publisher would want to know that? You better believe it! A fact like that should go in the author bio (and the cover letter and the summary sheet).

When you're writing your author bio, here are some things to consider in deciding what exactly you want to say:

* How many books have you written and did any of them win awards or reach a bestseller list? That may drive your first sentence. It's better to

start out "Joe Schmoesky, award-winning author of six novels, ..." than to start out "Joe Schmoesky..."

* Do you have academic qualifications, work experience, or ANY relevant life experience that makes you unusually qualified to write a book on your topic? It's better to say, "L.A. homicide detective Joe Schmoesky's debut novel, set on the mean streets of L.A., ..." than to say, "Maine schoolgirl Tiffany Schmoesky's debut novel, set on the mean streets of L.A., ..."

* Have you done any special research for your book? Read the acknowledgments in *THE CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR*, by Jean M. Auel, to see a hint of the Xtreme research Ms. Auel did. Or read the Author's Note at the end of Anne Rice's novel *CHRIST THE LORD: OUT OF EGYPT* to see an example of research far beyond what most writers dream of. If you have done research at this level, highlight that in your bio.

* Is there anything unusual about you that makes you a story all on your own? Christopher Paolini was 15 (if my memory is correct) when he wrote his fantasy *ERAGON*. And homeschooled. That's a story all by itself. James Frey's (alleged) past as a drug addict, alcoholic, and criminal helped propel his book *A MILLION LITTLE PIECES* to stardom.

* Tell the truth! Tell the truth! Tell the truth! In an author bio, you are expected to put your best foot forward. You are also expected to not lie. This is what took James Frey down. Not merely his author bio, but big chunks of his book, were fabricated. Make sure every word in your author bio is true and that every implication is also true. Because if you lie in your bio, somebody, somewhere, will notice and you will get shredded--usually just when your career takes off.

It won't hurt to read a few author bios. You'll often find them on the back cover or the inside back flap of published books. See what kind of copy works for these folks. Then go write a bio that zings.

Part 5

I would guess that for beginning writers, the most agonizing part of writing a proposal is the "outline."

So let's be clear right up front: There's no such thing as an outline for a novel proposal.

If you're writing nonfiction, then yes, you're allowed to write an outline for your proposal. But in fiction, we don't do outlines. We do synopses.

I'm not just evading the issue by renaming it. A synopsis is not an outline. Outlines are those horrible things you wrote in 7th grade that had Roman numerals at the top level and then capital letters at the next level and the Arabic numerals and then lower case letters, etc. A synopsis is nothing like that.

Don't get me wrong. A synopsis is still hard work and you still might hate writing it. But if you're going to hate something, at least you should hate the right thing.

Truth be told, I don't care that much for writing synopses myself. I much prefer writing character sketches. I was lucky to team up with a co-author for two of my books, John Olson, who loves writing synopses and excels at it. John taught me a thing or two about writing the beasts.

Here are a few rules I use for writing synopses:

- * Tell the story in present tense
- * Keep it short -- two pages is FINE
- * Stick to the plot and avoid long explanations about the characters or the setting
- * Focus on the major characters

Let's look at these in turn.

Why tell the story in present tense for your synopsis? I have no idea. It's just what everybody does. This is a case where it's best to go with the crowd.

Why keep it short? My editor friends tell me that synopses are the most boring part of a proposal. The general recommendation I hear from them is to limit it to two pages.

Most writers are only too happy to keep the synopsis short, but there are those oddballs who think that a fifty-page synopsis is barely enough to tell the story. All I can say to weirdos like that is this: "Have mercy on your poor editor! A synopsis is always going to be boring because it tells instead of showing. Make it as short as possible, so your editor can get to your sample chapters as soon as possible."

Why focus on the plot for your synopsis? Because that's what a synopsis IS -- a summary of the plot. There just isn't time to go into what makes dear Scarlett tick, or why Spock hates his father. Put all that in your character sketches.

I realize that seat-of-the-pants writers are in agony over the idea of focusing on plot. Seat-of-the-pants writers don't know the plot until they write the story, so of course they can't summarize it until it's written.

My only advice to SOTP writers is this: Do a spectacular job on your character sketches, and pray your editor doesn't notice that your synopsis contains no actual story. If you choose a character-oriented editor, she probably won't notice, and if your character sketches are fab, she won't care.

Finally, why focus on the major characters? That's easy. You've got two pages, single-spaced. 900 words, max. That doesn't give you ROOM to talk

about your fifteen brilliantly drawn minor characters. Focus on the five most important characters. If they aren't brilliantly drawn, then fire them and hire some of the minor characters you're in love with.

If you want to see a competently done synopsis, then check out the one John Olson and I did for our novel OXYGEN. It's in a proposal I've had on my web site for ages, so you can also see an example of a pretty good proposal.

I have truncated the synopsis because we didn't want to give away the entire story. But there's enough there to see how it's done. We didn't summarize every chapter. We chose key chapters and summarized each in one or two paragraphs.

Here's the link:

<http://www.rsingermanson.com/assets/pdf/O2Proposal.pdf>

Have fun!

Avoiding Scammer Agents

A good agent is worth his weight in contracts. I have a terrific agent (Lee Hough). The agent I worked with before Lee was also amazing (Chip MacGregor, who has now moved on to a job with a major publishing house.) The agent I worked with before them (now deceased) was rather less effective, but he was honest.

In this article, I want to talk about the sludge of the publishing world -- dishonest agents.

That is a nasty, dangerous business to be tangling myself in. By good luck, I don't need to get tangled very far. Lynne Marie Zerance has already done all the tangling necessary.

Lynne, as you may recall, edits the e-zine for The Editorial Department, a highly respected independent editorial group. If you've ever read the classic book, *SELF-EDITING FOR FICTION WRITERS*, by Renni Browne and Dave King, then all I need to tell you is that Renni Browne founded the company. (If you haven't read the book, then . . . why haven't you? Most published novelists have.)

In the May 31 issue of The Editorial Department's e-zine, Lynne wrote an article on The Dark Side of Publishing. Here's how the article begins:

"There's no question about it: Writers, as a group, are among the most vulnerable of people. And let's face it, we're among the biggest dreamers, too. Perhaps that's what makes us a prime target for those who make their living preying on people they perceive as naive and gullible. After all, who better to tell (and sell) a tale to than a writer with a tale they're trying to tell -- and hopefully . . . someday . . . actually sell?"

You can read the rest of the article here:

<http://www.editorialdepartment.com/content/view/209/99/>

It's a long article, but I highly recommend that you read it. Now.

The article includes a list of the 20 most questionable literary agencies in the business. Are you working with one of these agencies? Find out!

The article also includes a list of 20 tips on how to spot a bogus literary agency. I will make one caveat to this tip list:

Tip #17 says to beware of agents who are not located in or near the East or West Coast publishing centers. (Here, "East Coast" means New York, Boston, Philadelphia, or Washington, D.C. and "West Coast" means Los Angeles or San Francisco.)

However, if you are writing for the Christian publishing business (about 20% of the readers of this e-zine write for that niche market), then Tip #17 does not apply. Many of the top agents in Christian publishing are NOT located in those areas. For example, Alive Communications is in Colorado Springs; Books and Such is in Santa Rosa; The Knight Agency is in Atlanta; The Steve Laube Agency is in Phoenix.

If you want a quick way to find the best agents for your niche market, do what a friend of mine did -- ask a few editors for their recommendations. While this may sound like asking the fox for the names of some good watchdogs, it isn't. A bad watchdog means an easy chicken dinner for the fox today, tomorrow, and forever. A bad agent means a miserable negotiating experience for an editor today -- and no sales for that agent's clients ever again.

And how do you get a good agent? Great question. Long answer. We'll discuss that next month. See ya then.

How To Find An Agent

In the last issue, I referred you to a very long article on avoiding scammer agents. I promised to talk this month about how to find a good agent. This is a question that occupies the minds of novice writers quite a bit, but professional writers hardly think about it at all.

Why don't pros worry about finding an agent? Simple. Because the more of a track record you have, the easier it is to find an agent.

As an unpublished writer, I spent a good solid year to find my first agent. He was a nice guy, an older gentleman, but unfortunately he died before I ever got published. I wound up selling my first 3 books without an agent. Then an agent found me. An excellent agent who worked with a large agency and had a number of good clients. And he found me because he'd been my editor for one of my books and he knew I could write.

That's the BEST way to find an agent -- from the pool of people who know you. The longer you work in the publishing world, the bigger that pool is. If my agent died today, I know half a dozen excellent agents who I suspect would be interested in working with me.

But what if you haven't been publishing very long? What if you don't actually know ANY agents? Well . . . the SECOND BEST way to find an agent is to have sold a book. That's how one of my buddies landed a well-known heavy-hitter agent. He'd sold his second book and decided it was time to get an agent. So he emailed her, told her a little about himself, and had an agent inside a week. An agent who only has to negotiate a contract on a book, without having to sell it first, is a happy agent. This is a fairly common way to get an agent.

But . . . what if you haven't sold that first drafted book yet? What if you've got that heartbreaking work of staggering genius done, polished, ready to go, but you can't get your foot in the door because all the big publishers won't look at you unless you've got an agent? And all the agents want only published authors. Catch--22, right?

No, wrong.

Look, here's the honest truth: If you've REALLY got a heartbreaking work of staggering genius on your desk, then finding an agent to sell it is not going to be hard. Being a genius with a ready-to-go manuscript is the THIRD easiest way to find an agent.

Fact is, any true literary genius can write a killer query letter. (Or learn to write one -- read the article in the July issue of this e-zine on how to write a killer query letter.)

So write the killer query, send it to the 20 agents in Writer's Market who impress you most, and send the whole manuscript to the best of the 10 who respond to your query. (There will always be some who Just Say No, even if you're J.K. Rowling, so deal with that. You can mock them later when you're wealthy.)

Now, the blunt truth is that not everybody IS J.K. Rowling, so if it turns out you're not, don't lose hope. Most published writers aren't JKR, in fact, and yet most all of us have agents. So if you need an agent and your killer query letters have all been ignored, what do you do?

You still have options. The first thing you need is a sample of your best writing. That sample MIGHT be a whole manuscript, or it might be three good chapters, or it might be just a brilliant proposal and a couple of pages. Or none of the above, but something just as good. Fill in the blank. It just needs to be your best writing.

The FOURTH best way to find an agent is to take that sample to a writing conference and show it around. Make some appointments with people. Talk with agents, obviously. But also talk with editors -- you might get lucky and sell it, but there's a decent chance that the editor might recommend you to an agent.

Show the thing to published writers, too. I've connected up more than one unpubbed writer with an agent who I thought would be a good fit. But I ONLY do this at conferences, because when I teach at a conference, part of the job description is to help connect writers to agents or editors. When I go home, my job description reverts back to Ordinary Guy Who Doesn't Have Infinite Amounts Of Time. The rules are just different at a conference.

OK, but what if you don't have a good piece of writing to show at a conference? Well then . . . what the devil do you need an agent for? If your writing stinks, there's no agent alive who can help you get published. Good writing comes first. As soon as you have good writing, you'll have agents circling. Just like blood attracts sharks, except that agents are MUCH nicer than sharks.

If you don't have a terrific piece of writing, you're not ready for an agent. That is a hard truth, but it's the only truth that's going to do you any good, so I'm going to stick with it.

Work on your craft until you've got some really excellent writing. And this is not just a case of "I got mine, so nanny-nanny!" Listen, I spent more than ten years polishing my craft before I sold my first book. I have a friend who spent twenty-six years developing her skills before she sold her first. Quality takes time. (I bet all the agents who read this e-zine will email me tomorrow to tell me I'm right.)

There is one final case to consider, and it's one that always pains me to see. What if you've got an excellent piece of writing, but you don't have the

money to go to a writing conference? The truth is that conferences are expensive, and you have to take time off work to go. You may have to travel, which adds to the cost. And you may be stretched to the limit financially. What if that's your case?

Like I say, it hurts to see that. The advice I've sometimes heard is, "Yeah, well it takes money to make money, so find the money." I don't much care for that advice. The world is not an equal place. Not everyone can just "find the money."

Whaddaya do if you're flat broke and you've got a great piece of writing?

That's tricky, but there ARE options.

We already talked about writing a killer query letter. It's worth a shot, and it might work. Just be aware that agents get lots of queries and it's a rare query that leads to anything.

Another option is to join an online writing organization and develop your contacts online. This is going to take time, but it can be done. You can't just email somebody and say, "Read my stuff -- I'm a genius!" You won't convince anyone you're a genius by saying so. You convince them you're a genius by showing it. With great writing.

A third option is to write a blog. Anyone can write a blog for free, and cream really does rise to the top. It just takes time. If you really are a great writer, people are going to notice your blog. Even if you're flat broke. In the blogosphere, nobody knows or cares how much money you've got. They care how well you can write.

Bottom line, and this is another hard truth: Getting an agent is like getting a loan -- it's only easy if you don't need it. Maybe that's why there are so

many scammer agents out there. If you missed the article I mentioned in my last issue, here's a link to it again:

<http://www.editorialdepartment.com/content/view/209/99/>

Did you like that?

Randy has a lot more to teach.

[Check out his online writing courses.](#)