

A Writer's Edge About Agents

By Georganna Hancock

Writer's agents are called "Literary Agents." They can fulfill many functions that help writers sell their writings and manage their careers. Ethical agents work on a commission basis, not by charging fees or on salaries. Confusion and unwarranted animosity abound concerning agents and representation. Some of the questions this article addresses include:

- Who needs an agent?
- When should you get one?
- What do agents want?
- What is the best way to find a good agent?
- What do agents do for a writer?
- How much do agents charge?

Whether or not you need an agent depends on several factors: your understanding of the publishing industry, the type of manuscript you have, how much work you are willing to do yourself and your goals for your writing career.

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In general, agents are necessary to sell novels, especially for beginners. The largest book publishers don't accept either queries or submissions of fiction or nonfiction unless sent by an agent. Most freelancers, and those who write anything other than books, don't usually employ agents. One exception is an agented writer with a published book, who subsequently writes short stories or articles. In that case, the agent might handle placing the shorter pieces.

Although you'll probably need an agent for access to the largest publishers, occasionally one holds an open contest or calls for unagented manuscripts to be submitted for a special book, a series or a particular imprint. This is most likely to occur in genre fiction lines (mysteries, romance, westerns). Smaller publishers sometimes accept unagented fiction and often nonfiction, but you'll do well to obtain an agent for contract negotiations. An agent will know what's reasonable and standard for your type of work. Agents also receive your advances and royalties and pass them on to you after deducting their commissions, which ranges between 10 and 25 percent, depending on the rights sold and your particular situation.

The oldest method for finding a good agent is still the best— get yourself referred by another happy client. Easy to say, quite difficult to accomplish in reality. The next best

method is to ensure you're dealing with an ethical, established agent or agency. You can search the database of members of the Association of Artists Representatives at www.aar-online.org/ and over 900 agents at www.agentquery.com. Books listing agents are also available, including the annual *Writer's Market*.

Agents became considerably more accessible with the advent of the Internet. Their websites usually indicate if they are accepting new clients and provide guidelines for querying them. Several third-party websites offer to match writers and agents, some for a fee. Find agents on your own by Googling "literary agents."

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When you've decided which agents to contact, you'll need to send them queries asking if they would be interested in reading your manuscript. This should be a one-page letter (some accept email queries) containing an enticing first paragraph about your book. A one-paragraph synopsis summarizes the essence of your book. Another section briefly describes yourself. End up with a paragraph that offers your novel manuscript or book proposal and manuscript for nonfiction. Don't forget to thank the agents for their time spent in considering your request. Some sources advise skipping right to including the proposal material with a query. Agent Nathan Bransford autopsies a good query at <http://nathanbransford.blogspot.com/2006/11/anatomy-of-good-query-letter.html>.

Different agents want different materials, once they've given the go-ahead from your query letter. A book proposal for nonfiction is considerably more complex than that for fiction, which might only include information about yourself, a synopsis and sample chapters. A proposal for a nonfiction book might call for chapter outlines, market analysis, a plan for promotions as well as the items mentioned for a novel.

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